

**“If I Don’t Input Those Numbers...It Doesn’t Make Much of a Difference”: Insulated  
Precarity and Gendered Labor in Friends**

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**Abstract**

This article examines the middle-class work culture of *Friends*, reading it as a text imbued with both Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia. I argue that the “insulated precarity” of *Friends*’ protagonists, and their seeming nonchalance about work, marks out the show as a prime example of a Clinton-era “boom” text and as a one that struggles with rising anxiety inherent in neoliberalism. I focus on the role of Chandler Bing, who quits his nondescript office job to follow his dreams, before realizing he does not know what they are, and ends up in advertising. I argue that while *Friends*’ self-reflexive comic mode facilitates sympathetic treatment of Chandler as a “New Man,” his perpetual crisis of masculinity (his infertility, his periodic reliance on his wife’s income, and the constant questioning of his sexuality) is related to the lack of purpose in his career and, thus, the changing work culture that characterized the period.

## Introduction

The implausibility of a group of twenty-somethings, who spend much of their time lounging around drinking coffee, being able to afford sizeable Manhattan apartments and enjoying relatively privileged lifestyles was often noted by fans and critics during the original run of *Friends* (NBC 1994-2004). Indeed, this is knowingly acknowledged at regular points throughout the series, not least in the very final scene (watched when it first aired by an audience of over 50 million in the U.S. alone),<sup>1</sup> when the six main characters are about to leave Monica and Chandler's apartment for the last time, and Chandler says: "It was a happy place, filled with love and laughter, but more importantly because of rent control it was a friggin' steal" (S10 E18 "The Last One: Part 2").<sup>2</sup>

Viewed from the other side of the 2008 financial crisis, when politicians' claims of economic recovery and rising employment across the Global North are betrayed by stagnant wages, rising rents, unprecedented levels of personal (and state) debt, pension crises, and widespread anxieties about the instability wrought by short-term zero-hour contracts, a shrivelling middle-class, and a rising precariat, what I'm calling the "insulated precarity" of *Friends*' multiple protagonists, and their seeming nonchalance about work, both marks out the show as a prime example of a Clinton-era "boom" text that is (like most popular texts, at least on the surface) relaxed and uncritical of liberal-democratic capitalist hegemony and serves to account at least in part for the show's enduring popularity in the precarious present, as a fantasy version of early adulthood. The central contention of ~~the present~~this article, therefore, is that this "insulated precarity" in *Friends* allowed anxieties about socio-cultural

change, evident in the late 1990s, to be elaborated and played out in a “safe space”, circumscribed by the conventions of the sitcom genre, whereby daily concerns about work and careers provide humor rather than (overt) stress, and are framed within broader (conservative) happy-ever-after life narratives (Grote 1983; Eaton 1978). Further, ~~this article~~ considers the affective appeal of *Friends* for contemporary audiences, especially as a source of comfort in an era of ever-increasing social stratification as brought to bear by neoliberal capitalism and the abhorrent policies of austerity carried out in the name of individual responsibility and economic efficiency following the 2008 crash.<sup>3</sup>

In terms of the latter, I read *Friends* as a text imbued with both types of nostalgia theorised by Svetlana Boym in ~~her 2001 book~~ *The Future of Nostalgia*: first, through “restorative nostalgia”, whereby looking backwards to a long-lost world is sentimental, romantic, and essentially conservative; and second, through “reflective nostalgia”, whereby looking to the past critically has the potential to be productive and even transformational in looking to the future (Boym 2001). Reading *Friends* in light of Boym’s formulation allows consideration of the comfort that the show brings to present-day viewers: both Gen X-ers watching re-runs for the umpteenth time; and millennials who have grown up with *Friends* as a constant presence throughout their lives.<sup>4</sup> Part of the enduring appeal of *Friends*, I contend, is that it is a paean to an earlier age of middle-class work culture and community before the attenuation of everyday life as a result of changes to work patterns and life narratives that have intensified in the time since. The show, therefore, may be understood as a document of a key historical moment of change, at the turn of the century when Generation X is surpassed by Generation Y, also known as the Millennial generation. From a critical standpoint, I take the explicit restorative nostalgia of *Friends* and, in the broad tradition of cultural studies (understanding popular texts as a site of a struggle for meaning) twist it into the reflective

nostalgia that Boym argues can be productive. While *Friends* is most certainly not a radical text in any sense of the term, it is one that has much to say about the growing anxieties about work culture at the turn of the century, and crucially, in terms of its enduring popularity, one that serves to index how much things have altered since then. And because things have got demonstrably worse for a majority of working people in the 20 years since it first aired – in terms of employment conditions, wages, debt, and rising anxieties fuelled by precarity – the show is increasingly loaded with nostalgia for a pre-crash economy where (for most of the characters at least) jobs were meaningful and long-term life narratives could be imagined and projected into the future. The series, for example, sees Rachel wean herself off parental dependency, taking a job as a waitress before working her way up the ladder in the fashion industry; Ross gains tenure as a university professor; Phoebe’s flakiness is tempered by her later employment as a masseuse in a spa that includes a 401K; and Monica’s aspirations of being a chef have numerous ups-and-downs, before she (presumably) settles down to be a stay-at-home mom when she and Chandler move to the suburbs with their infant twins. Even Joey, whose acting career is constantly portrayed as something of a joke, sees his job as a vocation and clearly takes pleasure in his work while being driven by aspirations of future success.

The one character for whom work is not fulfilling and meaningful is Chandler Bing, who, until late on in the series, works in a job he largely despises, and is the one character through which the show explicitly deals with issues of neoliberal work culture in a sustained manner. As I’ll argue, Chandler’s problems with work are linked deeply to his anxieties about masculinity, which is inflected in peculiar ways in comparison to the other male characters.

Commented [NE1]: Diane thinks that this contradicts my point about Monica on p10.

[INSERT HERE IMAGE OF CHANDLER IN THE BATH]

While *Friends* does not explicitly critique the circumstances it inhabits, it does invite us, from a critical scholarly perspective, to consider those circumstances carefully because of the repetition of plot lines, individual set pieces, and jokes about work and working life that appear regularly throughout the series. Indeed, along with romantic plot lines, issues of work and career account for one of the most dominant ideological frameworks through which *Friends* both functions as a comedy and as a document of the particularities of the changes to middle-class work culture at a distinct juncture in the history of American capitalism.

### **Generation Friends**

The term Generation X was famously popularised in 1991 when the Canadian writer Douglas Coupland published *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, a novel about three twenty-something friends living in California's Coachella valley, who consciously choose to reject the aspirational life trajectories of their parents' generation – the Baby Boomers – and instead work in dead end jobs, spend their free time telling each other ironic stories, and do their best to “opt out” of late capitalist society (Coupland 1996). A key postmodern text, its biting tone and numerous pop culture references were foundational in cementing the “Slacker” sensibility that was reinforced over the next few years in popular discourse within myriad cultural products such as the grunge rock of Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and L7; the writing of Bret Easton Ellis, Elizabeth Wurtzel, and Chuck Palahniuk; and, perhaps most consistently, in US indie cinema. In terms of the latter, as Peter Hanson has argued, the dominant trend during the following decade was for films that ‘created a youth culture anchored in irony, apathy and disenfranchisement’, made by directors who ‘grew up during one of the most tumultuous periods in American history’ (Hanson 2002:1).<sup>5</sup>

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The general mood of alienation manifest in these texts is a foundational part of the ways Gen-X identity was constructed culturally throughout the 1990s: something that has been considered by critics as a cultural response to a deeper malaise. Tara Brabazon, for instance, argues in her book *From Revolution to Revelation* that, in the 1980s, “as a result of structural unemployment, youths were no longer required as a market. They were therefore unmade.” And, by the start of the 1980s – as the experience of punk had already shown – all forms of identity with potential to be oppositional to dominant culture were quickly recuperated. Thus, according to Brabazon, Generation X’s ironic response to this predicament was immediately judged ‘inauthentic’ compared to prior youth cultures (Brabazon 2005:11). As such, postmodernism – growing in influence throughout the 1980s and 90s – is another key to understanding Gen X identity. Slavoj Žižek, for example, theorizes that the cynicism and ironical distance that defines the postmodern subject, who refuses to believe in ideological truth, masks the ‘fundamental level of ideology’, and, as such, is a condition that merely serves to perpetuate exploitation and alienation (Žižek 1989: 33).

It is into this milieu that *Friends* emerged in 1994, and it is instructive to consider the extent to which the show elaborates a Gen-X identity, especially in terms of characterization. The fact that the six central characters spend so much time lounging about, seemingly rarely going to work, echoes the experiences and sensibility of the characters in Coupland’s 1991 novel.<sup>6</sup> And from the perspective of the present – an era defined by anxiety<sup>7</sup> – it also invites the viewer to be nostalgic about an earlier culture whereby work was less stressful, competitive, and all encompassing; where there was time to be reflective, or even to just do nothing.

Read on another level, however, with the banality of the coffee shop as a background, the show does regularly invite consideration of each character's anxieties about their chosen professions, with varying degrees of stress attached. And, it is in these scenes and storylines, that the protagonists of *Friends* can be understood to be more than just stereotypical Gen-X slackers who reject the work ethic of capitalism. Instead, *Friends* can be read as engaging with the wider socio-economic currents at the end of the twentieth century, which we now know with hindsight were heading towards the big crash of 2008.

### ***Friends* and Work Culture**

A common thread in recent research by critics of capitalism in general, and sociologists and anthropologists of work and working culture in particular, has been to emphasise that changes to work patterns since the 1970s have altered the ways workers think about and imagine their lives and futures. Along with the privatisation of industry, and the de-funding of social provision, the replacement of long-term, stable employment with short-term, flexible, "zero-hours" contracts for many workers has been one of the clearest and most profound structural alterations in the move from post-war Fordism to post-70s neoliberalism and what Liam Connell calls "the era of flexible labour" (2017: 2). As Jeremy Gilbert notes in *Anticapitalism and Culture*,

much of what we think of today as traditional – the nuclear family, the job-for-life, the suburban neighbourhood – is actually a product of decades of Fordism, which created very stable conditions of capital accumulation but kept financial capital on a tight leash... Neoliberalism has dislocated and destabilised the key sources of personal and social identity... (Gilbert 2008: 176).

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And as other Marxist writers such as David Harvey have demonstrated, as labor has weakened in relation to capital, compared to the so-called post-war golden age, it is not surprising that work has become more precarious: it was only through the rise of labor power that capitalism, throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, was forced into developing social benefits such as welfare (Harvey 2005; 2010; 2014; 2017).

In *Nice Work If You Can Get It*, Andrew Ross shows how the benefits and securities of the Keynesian era dissolved in the face of the shift from industry to information, and secure, long-term employment was replaced by freelancers, temps, adjuncts and migrants (Ross 2009), leading to a crisis he further examines, especially in relation to debt, in *Creditocracy* (2013). Richard Sennett, meanwhile, in *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, explains how these new unstable conditions do not allow for long-term life planning, writing that the bureaucratic and legal constraints in earlier versions of capitalism had profound consequences in imagining the future:

Rationalized time enabled people to think about their lives as narratives—narratives not so much of what necessarily will happen as of how things should happen. It became possible, for instance, to define what the stages of a career ought to be like, to correlate long-term service in a firm to specific steps of increased wealth. Many manual workers could for the first time plan how to buy a house. The reality of business upheavals and opportunities prevented such strategic thinking. In the flux of the real world, particularly in the flux of the business cycle, reality did not of course proceed according to plan, but now the idea of being able to plan defined the realm of individual agency and power (Sennett 2006: 23).<sup>8</sup>

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Sennett's thoughts on this chime with Zygmunt Bauman's late work on 'liquid modernity', where the 'the collapse of those institutions that ... constituted for many years the premises on which modern society was built',<sup>9</sup> have led to a perennial state of impermanence; to social relationships (including in this specific instance, romantic relationships) that are inherently provisional:

[Semi-detached couples] abhor the idea of sharing home and household, preferring to keep their separate abodes, bank accounts and circles of friends, and share time and space when they feel like it – but not when they don't. Like the old-style work that has split nowadays into a succession of flexible times, odd jobs or short-term projects, and like the old-style property purchase or lease that tends to be replaced these days with time-share occupation and package holidays – the old-style “till death us do part” marriage, already elbowed out by the self-admittedly temporary “we will see how it works” cohabitation, is replaced by a part-time, flexible-times “coming together” (Bauman 2003: 36).

Melissa Gregg emphasizes the ways that structures of work under different stages of capitalism determine different emotional and affective outcomes. Gregg also notes, crucially, that one of these outcomes in the neoliberal era is the cultural importance placed on careers as markers of success or failure. In *Work's Intimacy*, she writes that “in the years preceding the recent economic downturn, a range of commentators failed to appreciate the extent to which middle-class professionals had been encouraged to see work as the most significant demonstration of their success and identity”, and argues that “the discourse of ‘work-life

balance' disfigured and camouflaged the fact that work experience was getting relatively worse" (Gregg 2011: 16).

It is this socio-historical shift with which *Friends* engages, albeit rather gently, in terms of the relationships each of the main characters has with work. The trajectory of Joey's career as an actor, Monica's career as a chef, Rachel's career in fashion, Ross's career as a scientist and academic, and Phoebe's careers as a musician and masseuse, all feature typical successes and failures, without anxiety about their jobs becoming their defining characteristic. Indeed, by the end of the series, each character is relatively happy with their working lives. As I elaborate upon below, the one exception to this, however, is Chandler, for whom work is a constant struggle.

Joey's life as an aspiring actor begins with his working part time in various jobs (an early example is when he does a photo shoot that turns out to be a public service poster campaign for raising awareness of sexually transmitted diseases [S1 E9]) while taking any bit part roles in movies he can get (in one memorable episode, he is ecstatic when revealing to his friends that he is to play Al Pacino's "butt double" in a forthcoming feature film [S1 E6]). In season two, while selling perfume in a department store, he lands the role of Dr Drake Ramoray on the soap opera *Days of Our Lives*: a part that brings him fame and enough financial independence to move out of his shared apartment with Chandler and into one of his own. However, after insulting the writers of the show – by boasting in an interview that he writes his own lines – those writers get their revenge by killing off his character, after which he goes back to living with his former roommate. By the conclusion of *Friends*, however, when Chandler and Monica move to the suburbs with their children, Joey has won back his role on the soap, is getting parts in Hollywood movies (including a war film with a famous actor – played by Gary Oldman [S7 E23]), and has gained a certain degree of international

fame (by season 10, he is the star of a television campaign advertising “Lipstick for Men” that airs in Japan [S10 E6]).

Monica, meanwhile, begins as a sous chef, a role she enjoys before being fired for taking a kick-back (in an episode [S2 E5] that is particularly concerned with issues of employment, and which I examine below). She then works as a food reviewer before planning to set up a catering business with Phoebe. This plan fails to materialise – to Phoebe’s chagrin – when Monica is offered a job as a chef by a restaurant owner who is furious about a review she has written and challenges her to do better; however, the staff hate her. Later, she becomes a chef at a high-end restaurant, which keeps her in New York when her partner, Chandler, (inadvertently) takes a job in Oklahoma: one example among many of the show playing with gendered expectations of labor. Much humor is made of the fact that Monica supports Chandler during his period of unemployment. Following Chandler’s decision to quit his job in Tulsa – claiming that being apart from Monica is just too difficult – the following exchange occurs while Chandler is checking the jobs section in a newspaper:

**Chandler:** Actuary... no. Bookkeeper, um no. Topless dancer... Hey, you know what I just realized? You, are the sole wage earner. You are the head of the household. I, don't do anything. I'm a kept man!

**Monica:** You are! Hey, here's twenty bucks. Why don't you go buy yourself something pretty while I'm at work tomorrow? (S9 E10)

By the final episode, when the couple are about to move to their house in the suburbs, there is no definitive indication either way as to whether Monica remains in post or is intending on

becoming a stay-at-home mom. But, as we'll see in my examination of Chandler below, the couple's relationship repeatedly engages with issue of gender and employment in ways that invite questions about traditional expectations.

Commented [NE2]: Contradiction?

Phoebe is arguably the character who possesses the least amount of work anxiety of all the friends. Much is made of her difficult childhood, especially after the suicide of her mother, and her history of living for a period "on the streets"; though this subject matter is largely dealt with in a less than serious manner, for example, when it is revealed that Phoebe had mugged Ross in the distant past (S9 E15). Indeed, the burden of her history is focused much more on emotional relationships with her mother and her brother rather than on financial hardship. Phoebe's attempts at a career in music, despite her fundamental lack of talent, is a clear signifier of her "kookiness", and one of the more outlandish jokes in the show, though there are moments where her attitude to her career is of central significance to her character. For instance, she is disgusted when her signature song "Smelly Cat" is stolen by her playing partner and ends up as a jingle on a television commercial, after Phoebe insists that she performs for art and not for money (S3 E14). Phoebe's self-defining, gentle anti-corporatism arises later in the series when she takes a job at a spa chain, and clearly likes the stability that this affords her, though, significantly, hides this from her friends because it does not fit her "hippy" persona.

Rachel, meanwhile, begins life on the show in the first episode of Season One as a spoiled rich kid, whose father is a wealthy surgeon. We are introduced to her after she has run out on her wedding to another rich physician – a dentist – with whom it is made clear she is not in love. A big deal is made of her cutting up daddy's credit cards on which she has previously depended, and, in the words of Monica, entering the "real world" (S1 E1). Rachel takes a job in Central Perk as a waitress – a job she hates, is terrible at, and pays so little after

tax that the other friends feel compelled to supplement her meagre earnings with extra tips. With encouragement from the other main characters, she retains the dream of working in the fashion industry, and throughout the rest of the series, she works in various jobs first in Bloomingdale's, then at Ralph Lauren, before being offered a job in Paris. Whether she takes up this role or not is perhaps the biggest climax of the show (S10 E18), since it is the culmination of the on-again off-again romantic relationship with Ross that runs through multiple seasons.

In each of these characters' cases, the insulated precarity of the show is evidenced through the fact that any work problems they endure are rarely particularly serious and certainly never terminal. When problems at work occur (Joey being killed off from *Days of Our Lives* [S2 E18], Monica getting herself fired for misunderstanding company policy on taking home food from work [S2 E5], or Phoebe biting a client's backside [S4 E4]), there is always a safety-net in place to ensure that these problems do not become crises. In the case of Joey and Monica, there's always someone there to pay their way, at least temporarily – Chandler for Joey, and her parents and/or Ross, for Monica; in the case of Phoebe, she inherits property (and we assume money) from her grandmother. As such, work troubles are largely dealt with (as we would expect in a sit-com) in a humorous way.

Perhaps the clearest example of this is the palaeontologist, Ross. We may consider how little stress about his work he is seen to endure. Beyond having to find novel ways of getting to class on time, having had back-to-back classes scheduled for him by his university's administration department (we see him arrive in a classroom, breathless, on rollerblades [S8 E12]) and having to deal with his computer crashing on the night before he is due to give a conference paper (S9 E23), Ross is rarely ever caught up with the stress of academic work. When he does take an enforced sabbatical (due to a nervous breakdown

triggered by his boss eating his sandwich [S5 E9]), the stress is related to his dysfunctional love life, rather than his career. This fantasy of a successful academic career with minimal teaching, and without any evidence of paperwork, grading, and inputting of marks – not to mention researching or writing – is underlined when, in the final season, he bursts into the coffee house and announces suddenly that he has gained tenure (S10 E14).

All this is not to suggest that the show never raises serious issues of work and working culture. Indeed, there are numerous examples of important storylines that deal with problems of work in general, and the consequences of being lowly-paid or unemployed in particular. One of these comes in the episode “The One with Five Steaks and an Eggplant” (S5 E5) when the group of friends are split in terms of “haves” and “have nots”, when Chandler plans a birthday surprise for Ross. The \$62 for Hootie and the Blowfish concert tickets is too much for Joey, Rachel, and Phoebe. Later, the group finds themselves in a restaurant to celebrate Monica’s promotion to her first chef’s job, and matters reach a head over splitting the bill equally, as Joey, Rachel, and Phoebe had ordered scantily due to their finances. The ensuing argument about finances sees Ross, Monica, and Chandler go to the concert without the others; but the next day Monica is put in the position of not taking a good salary for granted when she’s suddenly fired for supposedly misunderstanding company policy.

Another episode where earnings and status are foregrounded is when Joey gets a job as a tour guide at the museum where Ross works as a palaeontologist (S4 E11). Over lunch, Joey is upset when Ross refuses to sit with him at a table where all the other tour guides are bunched together. At this point it dawns on Joey that his friendship with Ross in this situation is being overridden by the politics of the workplace, where there is a clear dividing line between the experts and the service staff.<sup>10</sup>

Moments such as this, however briefly, pop the bubble that insulates the show. It is through the character of Chandler, though, that *Friends* (however tentatively) addresses the structural changes that Graeber, Sennett, Ross, Gregg, Connell and others have anatomized and critiqued. And I want to suggest that the show does this through linking Chandler's lack of satisfaction with his job to the way he is positioned as having trouble with his masculinity.

### **Chandler Bing's Bullshit Job**

It is made clear very early on in *Friends* that Chandler despises his nondescript office job, a position we are told that he initially took on a temporary basis but in which he has become stuck. Throughout the series, Chandler's job signifies inertia and his settling for a boring, albeit financially stable, existence, in opposition to, say, Joey, who largely struggles to pay the rent, but who can at least claim that he is "chasing his dreams." Chandler's predicament is highlighted in the episode "The One That Could Have Been" (S6 E15/16), which depicts an alternative reality in which Chandler quits his job and fulfils his dream of being a comic book writer. In another key scene (S1 E15), he attempts to quit his job but is lured into staying by being offered a large raise on top of the company's yearly bonus structure. Meanwhile, the extent of his boredom is emphasized again when, in the ninth season and still in the same job, he finds himself having agreed to take a position in Tulsa, Oklahoma, having fallen asleep in a meeting (S9 E2).

It is not a mistake that Chandler is in exactly the kind of employment that the anthropologist David Graeber has termed "Bullshit Jobs" (Graeber 2013). Graeber writes:

In the year 1930...Keynes predicted that technology would have advanced sufficiently by the century's end that countries like Great Britain and the US would

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achieve a 15-hour work week. There's every reason to believe he was right. In technological terms, we are quite capable of this. And yet, it didn't happen. Instead, technology has been marshalled, if anything, to figure out ways to make us all work more. In order to achieve this, jobs have had to be created that are, effectively, pointless. Huge swathes of people, in Europe and North America in particular, spend their entire working lives performing tasks they secretly believe do not really need to be performed. The moral and spiritual damage that comes from this situation is profound. It is a scar across our collective soul.<sup>11</sup>

This kind of argument has gained currency in activist communities and beyond in the aftermath of the financial crisis, with the notion of Fully Automated Luxury Capitalism another version of this utopian vision of machines being used to society's benefit that is currently in vogue in radical intellectual circles.<sup>12</sup>

In *Friends*, Chandler is the personification of exactly what Graeber is talking about (until, of course, he finds satisfaction late on in the show in advertising: which clearly should be considered one of the show's best work-related jokes). One recurring theme throughout the series is the fact that Chandler's job is pointless. In the very first episode, he announces that he has to go to work by saying, "All right, kids. I gotta get to work. If I don't input those numbers... [pause] It doesn't make much of a difference" (S1 E1): a line that serves to define his character as discontented and embittered.

A joke attached to this is that throughout the series none of the other characters really seem to understand what Chandler does for a living. During an improvised gameshow-style quiz (S4 E12), hosted by Ross, and set up as a competition between Rachel and Monica and Chandler and Joey to determine which two knows the other two best (and for which their

future accommodation is at stake), the women get stumped – and ultimately lose their apartment to the guys – when Ross asks them “What is Chandler Bing’s job?” The immediate look of horror on the faces of Rachel and Monica confirms the sad reality that his job is so nondescript that even his closest friends have no real idea of the specifics of his employment.

**Rachel:** Oh! Oh gosh, it has something to do with numbers.

**Monica:** And processing!

**Rachel:** Oh, well... and he carries a briefcase!

**Ross:** Ten seconds. You need this or you lose the game.

**Monica:** It's, um, it has something to do with transponding.

**Rachel:** Oh, oh, oh, he's a transpons... transponster!

**Monica:** That's not even a word!

Thereafter, the women (temporarily) lose their apartment to the men, though a few seasons later – when Monica and Chandler are in a romantic relationship, the joke is reversed when it's revealed that she knows the exact title of his position: something about which he is totally unaware. At this point (S9 E11), Chandler has finally quit to pursue a more fulfilling career and is offered an unpaid internship at an advertising agency, which means that he and Monica will need to postpone their dream of having a child.

**Chandler:** Maybe we could wait a little while.

**Monica:** Like a month?

**Chandler:** Or a year?

**Monica:** Really? You want to wait a year?

**Chandler:** Oh, it could be less than a year. You've heard my stuff. "Pants - Like shorts, but longer." It'll probably be more than a year.

**Chandler:** I'll just get my old job back.

**Monica:** No, I want you to have a job that you love. Not statistical analysis and data reconfiguration.

**Chandler:** I quit, and you learn what I do?

Finally, we might consider another key scene (S9 E10), where the pointlessness of Chandler's job compared to the jobs of all the other characters is made explicit. It is a few days before Christmas, and he is leaving to go to the job he took by accident when he fell asleep in a meeting:

**Chandler:** Say goodbye elves, I'm off to Tulsa.

**Monica:** I can't believe you're not gonna be here for Christmas.

**Ross:** You're really not coming back?

**Chandler:** Yeah, we have all this paperwork that needs to be filed by the end of the year. If I don't get it done, I'll be fired.

**Monica:** It's so unfair, you don't even like your job!

**Chandler:** So, who does?

**Phoebe:** Oh, I like my job.

**Joey:** I \*love\* my job.

**Rachel:** Yeah, I can't \*wait\* to go back to work.

**Ross:** I can't get \*enough\* dinosaurs!

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This is exactly what Graeber is talking about when he writes: “There is a profound psychological violence [in the way capitalism has eviscerated good jobs]. How can one even begin to speak of dignity in labour when one scarcely feels one’s job should not exist? How can it not create a sense of deep rage and resentment” (Graeber 2013).

For Chandler, there are two resentments that are closely linked. One is his job. The other is his masculinity. Chandler stands out among the male friends because being effeminate is central to his character in a way that is not quite true of the other central male characters. While a playfulness towards traditional masculinity and heteronormativity is certainly a key trope of the series with regard to all three main male characters, with Chandler it is overdetermined.<sup>13</sup> There are certainly situations where Joey wears girls’ panties (because they are more comfortable than mens’) (S7 E22); wears lipstick (for a Japanese television commercial) (S10 E6); dons a “man’s bag” (“because it’s as handy as it is becoming”) (S5 E13); and even at one point realises he has “turned into a woman” after spending too much time arranging flowers with his temporary roommate played by Elle Macpherson (S6 E8). But, in the final instance, the keys to Joey’s character are his Italianness, his macho attractiveness, and his (admittedly patchy) career as an actor.

Ross, meanwhile, is the palaeontologist: his parents’ favourite child, the science geek who grew up to study dinosaurs for a living. Again, while there are countless examples where traditional masculinity is challenged through Ross’s behaviour or mannerisms – when his attempt to impress his English girlfriend, Emily, by playing rugby goes spectacularly wrong (S4 E15); when it is revealed that he liked dressing up as a girl when he was a young child (S3 E4); and when all the friends laugh when they mistake in a photo a young, naked Ross for Monica, because of the way he has squeezed his genitals between his legs (S9 E5) – his

heterosexuality is never in doubt. His ultimately successful pursuit of Rachel is a constant throughout the ten seasons of *Friends*, and it is made clear explicitly through flashbacks to his time at college (S3 E6) that his romantic interest in her predates the timeframe of the show by many years. Furthermore, there are numerous other instances where his heterosexuality is reinforced explicitly: not least when Monica reveals that Ross used to steal their father's *Playboy* magazines as a child (S6 E9).

Along with being funny and constantly cracking jokes, which Chandler recognises as a defence mechanism that was first triggered by his parents' divorce in childhood (S5 E8), confusion about his sexuality is Chandler's defining characteristic. The show regularly encourages us to consider Chandler's problematic masculinity and what the show positions as his dubious sexuality as attributable to his unconventional childhood, during which his mother slept around and his cross-dressing father had an affair with the "pool boy". In another key scene from the first season that can be read in parallel to the fact that none of his friends really knows what he does for a job, Chandler's sexuality is the focus of scrutiny (S1 E8). It begins with Chandler sitting during a break at work, in what appears to be a communal area with tables, chairs, and a water cooler. A female colleague, Shelley, addresses him thus:

**Shelley:** Question. You're not dating anybody, are you, because I met somebody who would be perfect for you.

**Chandler:** Ah, y'see, perfect might be a problem. Had you said 'co-dependent', or 'self-destructive'...

**Shelley:** Do you want a date Saturday?

**Chandler:** Yes please.

**Shelley:** Okay. He's cute, he's funny, he's-

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**Chandler:** He's a he?

**Shelley:** Well yeah! ... Oh God. I - just - I thought - Good, Shelley. I'm just gonna go flush myself down the toilet now - okay, goodbye...

The screen transitions to Monica and Rachel's apartment.

**Chandler:** ...Couldn't enjoy a cup of noodles after that. I mean, is that ridiculous? Can you believe she actually thought that?

**Rachel:** Um... yeah. Well, I mean, when I first met you, y'know, I thought maybe, possibly, you might be...

**Chandler:** You did?

**Rachel:** Yeah, but then you spent Phoebe's entire birthday party talking to my breasts, so then I figured maybe not.

**Chandler:** Huh. Did, uh... any of the rest of you guys think that when you first met me?

**Monica:** I did.

**Phoebe:** Yeah, I think so, yeah.

Ross and Joey chip in that they never thought Chandler was gay. Then the conversation continues:

**Chandler:** Well, this is fascinating. So, uh, what is it about me?

**Phoebe:** I dunno, 'cause you're smart, you're funny...

**Chandler:** Ross is smart and funny, d'you ever think that about him?

**All:** Yeah! Right!

**Chandler:** WHAT IS IT?!

**Monica:** Okay, I-I dunno, you-you just- you have a quality.

**All:** Yes. Absolutely. A quality.

**Chandler:** Oh, oh, a quality, good, because I was worried you guys were gonna be vague about this.

The problems the friends have in pinning down this “quality” in Chandler mirrors their inability to remember what he does for a job. Until his redemption, when he finds a vocation in advertising, and settles down in the suburbs as the head of a traditional family unit, Chandler is a comedy version of The Narrator in the classic Gen X film *Fight Club* (1999): an office-bound clone in a suit whose life is going nowhere, and whose job defines his helplessness. We might wish to consider, then, that until this point he is the personification of the ways that capitalism has a tendency to eviscerate traditional masculinity, while re-affirming it **culturally** at the same time.

Commented [NE3]: Discursively?

## Conclusion

In the episode “The One Where Rosita Dies” (S7 E13), Phoebe, during one of her frequent periods of career flux, take a job in an office-supply company call center. Often referred to as the “factories of the 21<sup>st</sup> century”,<sup>14</sup> call centers, as Liam Connell writes “[demand] that

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Neil Ewen, “If I Don’t Input Those Numbers...It Doesn’t Make Much of a Difference”: Insulated Precarity and Gendered Labor in Friends. *Television and New Media* 19(8) pp. xx-xx. Copyright © 2018 (Neil Ewen). Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476418778425>

[workers] must adopt personalities that are inauthentic” (2017: 214). With characteristic kookiness, Phoebe (who, in some ways, has the ideal personality for the role), sets about calling prospective clients trying to sell “as much toner as possible”. However, she soon finds herself on the phone with a man in another open-plan office, whose honesty about his predicament is a stark refusal of the imperative to be upbeat at work. (Played by Jason Alexander as a version of his *Seinfeld* character George Costanza, this is one of *Friends*’ many intertextual jokes).<sup>15</sup>

“I’ve been working for ten years now at this meaningless and dead-end job and nobody even knows that I exist”, the man says. Phoebe pauses, then, cautiously asks: “Chandler?” The laugh track explodes. Even without being present, Chandler’s participation in the corporate hell of contemporary office work signifies despondency, inertia, and suicidal thoughts. “I work in a cubicle surrounded by people. I’ve been talking to you for five minutes now about killing myself and no-one’s even looked up from their desk”, continues the man on the end of the phone. He turns to his open-plan office filled with people and shouts: “Hey everybody. I’m going to kill myself”. Nobody responds.

A cut suggests a movement forward in time and we find Phoebe and the man still talking. Phoebe says: “Let’s just forget about the people in the office, there’s got to be someone else in your life worth sticking around for. What about your family or friends or even... a girlfriend?” The man laughs sardonically. “Yeah, right.” Phoebe replies: “Oh sorry, boyfriend?”.

This is an uncomfortable scene, not least because of its explicit homophobia. Particularly interesting are the ways that contemporary work culture (and anxieties about masculinity and sexuality) are foregrounded as a problem. Like Harry Braverman (1998) before him, Connell notes that the prevailing ideology does its best to obscure the conditions

that it reproduces, [while pointing out](#) that the lack of critical attention to ~~theis under~~ representation of work in [novel cultural products](#) “is surprising given the prominence that work has in many people’s lives and in the political cultures of contemporary society” (2017: 1).<sup>16</sup> [In contrast, the workplace sitcom has been the subject of much critical attention; however, less attention has been paid to the ideological function of work in other sitcom forms.](#) We might consider, then, that the extent to which work and working conditions is a recurring theme marks out *Friends* as a particularly productive popular text through which to consider the violence of contemporary capitalism on the lives of the middle class, for whom the aspirationalism of the twentieth century has quickly dissolved in the opening years of the new century.

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<sup>1</sup> “Friends' Finale's Audience Is the Fourth Biggest Ever”, nytimes.com, accessed March 7, 2017, [http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/08/arts/friends-finale-s-audience-is-the-fourth-biggest-ever.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/08/arts/friends-finale-s-audience-is-the-fourth-biggest-ever.html?_r=0)

<sup>2</sup> In a 2012 *Vanity Fair* interview, former president of NBC entertainment Warren Littlefield talks about how the difficulty of young adults starting out in major US cities made for an attractive prospect for a new show: “...I found myself thinking about the people in those cities, particularly the twentysomethings just beginning to make their way. I imagined young adults starting out in New York, L.A., Dallas, Philly, San Francisco, St. Louis, or Portland all faced the same difficulties. It was very expensive to live in those places as well as a tough emotional journey. It would be a lot easier if you did it with a friend. Addressing that idea became a development target for us. We wanted to reach that young, urban audience, those kids starting out on their own...”. Warren Littlefield, “With Friends Like These”, *Vanity Fair*, April 26, 2012, 152.

<sup>3</sup> There is a large and growing critical literature on the politics of austerity, including: Blyth (2013), Mirowski (2014), Seymour (2014), and Varoufakis (2016).

<sup>4</sup> As noted in the introduction to this special issue, *Friends* remains wildly popular among the students of this special issue’s editors who work in different universities across the UK. It is the single television text that has endured from our own time as undergraduates in the 1990s that can be relied on in class as an example with which everyone present is familiar. In the digital age of media dispersal, this is true of increasingly fewer texts.

<sup>5</sup> Key examples include: *Sex, Lies and Videotape* (d. Soderbergh 1989); *Reality Bites* (d. Stiller 1994); *The Virgin Suicides* (d. Coppola 1999); *Pulp Fiction* (d. Tarantino 1994); *Clerks* (d. Smith 1994); *Swingers* (d. Liman, 1994); *Before Sunrise* (d. Linklater 1995); *Fight Club* (d. Fincher 1999).

<sup>6</sup> In *Precarious Labour and the Contemporary Novel*, Liam Connell devotes a chapter to Coupland, reading the novels *Generation X*, *Microserfs*, and *J-Pod* together. Connell argues: “The...advantage of reading the three novels together is that, alongside the obvious parallels that they contain, they exhibit a growing preoccupation with work. Work and the workplace form a relatively minor part of *Generation X*, aside from the notable example of Dag’s move from marketing-executive to dropout. By contrast, in *Microserfs* and *JPod*, work is the central preoccupation and characters spend almost all of their time in the workplace. This shift is not coincidental and it does suggest economic changes that were taking place during the 1990s and early 2000s” (Connell 2017: 16-17).

<sup>7</sup> A useful article by the Institute of Precarious Consciousness argues that “each phase of capitalism has a dominant reactive affect, which is particularly induced by its dominant forms of power (at least in the core regions). In the nineteenth century, the dominant reactive affect

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was misery; in the Fordist period, boredom; in the neoliberal period, anxiety” (Institute of Precarious Consciousness 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Jodi Dean critiques Sennett in *Crowds and Party* arguing that his focus on individual narratives reproduces and fetishizes individuality at the expense of collective solidarity (2016: 27 – 35).

<sup>9</sup> Benedetto Vecchi in the introduction to Bauman’s *Identity* (Bauman 2004: 1).

<sup>10</sup> This particular scene is examined in light of its racial politics by Shelley Cobb in her article in this issue.

<sup>11</sup> Graeber extends this argument in *The Utopia of Rules* (2015).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example: Srnicek and Williams (2015); Greenfield (2017); Bastani (2018); “Fully automated luxury communism: a utopian critique”, Libcom.org, last accessed July 15, 2017, <https://libcom.org/blog/fully-automated-luxury-communism-utopian-critique-14062015>; “Fully automated luxury communism”, Guardian.com, last accessed July 15, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/mar/18/fully-automated-luxury-communism-robots-employment>

<sup>13</sup> For more on the performance of masculinity in *Friends*, see Hannah Hamad’s article in this issue.

<sup>14</sup> “Are call centres the factories of the 21<sup>st</sup> century?”, BBC.co.uk, last accessed March 28, 2018, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-12691704>

<sup>15</sup> See Alice Leppert’s article in this special issue.

<sup>16</sup> Connell is writing here specifically about the novel as a genre, but we can extrapolate this point across other media and cultural products more generally.