

# “Just the facts, ma’am”: Class, Masculinity and Family Representations in Jack Webb’s *Dragnet*

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## INTRODUCTION

Thinking about the origins of seriality in the history of American Television necessarily entails considering the rise of the first TV procedural crimes and in particular the role of Hollywood and figures such as Jack Webb, a prolific author who was able to create iconic shows, innovating and challenging the medium. *Dragnet* (1951-1959), in particular, was a revolution both in terms of technique and contents; its popular success was due not only to Webb’s experience as a radio program creator and actor in film noir but also to the collaboration of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and its controversial chief William H. Parker. *Dragnet*, which took its name from the police term “dragnet” – meaning a system of coordinated measures for apprehending criminals or suspects – soon became a real franchise, from the radio series, running on the NBC radio network from 1949 to 1957, to a considerable number of TV series seasons, films, parodies, soundtracks and books. Although the first season lasted 8 years (1951-1959), Webb relaunched the show in 1966, a revival that ran for another three seasons. Of course, the two editions of the series tend to differ significantly from an aesthetical point

of view – especially with the advent of colour – but also in terms of style and genre, mirroring the two different historical periods in which the show was aired. While the first series maintained a continuity with the radio series, using the same plots, scripts and often the same actors, the 60s series was more dramatic and ideologically centred. However, Jack Webb's *Dragnet* with his iconic Sgt. Joe Friday, challenged the conventional paradigm of the industry's early years of development, creating qualitative content and establishing tropes and conventions for many of the police dramas and procedural series of the following decades<sup>1</sup>. Before delving into the ideology and the narrative of *Dragnet* – from which I pulled two particularly significant episodes – it is worth considering two crucial aspects, the socio-political context at the time the show was conceived and the cinematographic and cultural imagery to which it may refer.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Los Angeles implemented policies of social control that became the core of federal programs for the development of civic security and for the reconfiguration of urban space; the *developers*, so called by Mike Davis in his iconic essay *City of Quartz* (1990), and their financial allies, together with real-estate agents, oil magnates and entertainment moguls were the driving force behind the public-private coalition in order to satisfy Los Angeles's emergence as a "world city", but not without creating land speculation, social inequality and racial issues. At this point the urgency of a perfect city "with the best police force in the world" – as the scoop reporter Sid Hudgens quips at the beginning of *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis 1997) – was partially an institutional response to social issues; the positive image of the LAPD was conveyed not only through figures such as William H. Parker – police Chief from August 9, 1950 until his death in 1966 – but also through the media. In fact, Chief Parker was able to create a powerful mythic aura around the image of the cop and of LAPD, promoting it through a widespread advertising campaign, thanks to the Hollywood publicity machine and actual professional publicity but also through the supervision of television and media contents including the first season of *Dragnet*, when he was Jack Webb's advisor in 44 episodes of the TV Series. *Dragnet* was "conceived at a time when the institution was fast losing legitimacy with the urban poor and even sectors of the middle class" (Sharrett 165); Parker's vetting of the scripts of such a famous

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<sup>1</sup> Not surprisingly, *Law & Order's* producer, Dick Wolf, claimed "Dragnet is the father of us all" (qtd. in Barton Palmer 33).

Television program was pure propaganda and widely increased its popularity and admiration in the entire nation. A process of erotization of the police was obtained through the representation of the LAPD macho ethos in movies that exalted "its icy and unnerving attitude toward the general citizenry" (Davis 42). This propaganda aimed at an erotization of power and supremacy as well as of a white masculinity, around which the police tried to configure its aesthetics. The series shows itself to be symptomatic not only of this aesthetics but also of the spread of American post-war ideology. In fact, the series' purpose was much more than a defence of the police, it wanted "to define 'American values' and to separate the righteous not just from criminals but from all the misfits, oddities, and malcontents who pollute the American landscape" (Sharrett 165). While the two editions of the series taken into account in this article heterogeneously show a right-wing conservative ideology, promoting – as I shall explain – family values and the domestic containment typical of Cold War narratives, what remains really constant is the representation of a work-oriented masculinity, irrespective of the surrounding environment and the succession of characters. This tendency can be explained by the clear influence of noir and classic police drama characterizations in the *Dragnet* franchise scripts, which are to be found in the creator Jack Webb's experience in noir works as well as in the cinematographic aesthetic of the 40s and early 50s, the golden age of film noir.

#### *DRAGNET*: FROM RADIO CRIME DRAMA TO POLICE SHOW

Prior to the *Dragnet* debut on NBC radio in 1949, Jack Webb was the star and radio actor of another detective program, *Pat Novak for Hire* (1946-1949), one of the post-war radio shows set in the San Francisco waterfront and heavily based on the classic hard-boiled protagonist, with fast and pulp dialogues and witty one-liners. Webb's career advanced significantly when in 1948 "a Hollywood casting director heard one of Webb's private-eye plays" (Buntin 389), and offered him a minor role in a new Eagle-Lion film, *He Walked by Night* (Welker 1948), widely recognized as one of the most important noir movies of the decade. This film was loosely based on the real murder of a California Highway patrolman and the script showed an impressive realism in the depiction of LAPD's investigation into the killer on the mean streets of Los Angeles. This realism was to establish the tone of both the *Dragnet* radio program and TV series but the influence

that *He Walked by Night* (1948) – directed by Alfred Louis Welker – had on *Dagnet*, proved to be crucial not only in terms of style and genre, but also for the relationship with the LAPD officers which Webb was able to build on the set. Most of the *Dagnet* radio and TV episodes are in fact inspired by the case files to which Webb had free access; this paved the way for the innovative and initially unpopular approach the show adopted from the very beginning. The realism and the documentary-style of his show were something new, which the audience was not used to; the spectator today may fail to consider the financial and artistic risk that *Dagnet* represented in 1949 with the first broadcasting of the radio show, and later in 1951, when the show format was converted into a TV show: “From the start, Webb was fanatical about getting the details right. Five soundmen were employed to create a range of more than three hundred special effects and wherever possible, the program used actual recordings from the department” (Buntin 294).

Webb’s show follows a fixed schema, in which a pattern is constructed in order to guarantee a realistic effect and confidential tone; the episodes always open with the same warning, a reappropriation of *He Walked by Night* (1948) opening: “Ladies and gentlemen, the story you’re about to see is true, the names have been changed to protect the innocents”. Similarly, the panorama shot of Los Angeles (the Civic Center, the blocks) at the beginning of every episode is very evocative of Welker’s movie opening. Each story is narrated in the first person by Joe Friday (played by Jack Webb) – the voiceover also seems to be an appropriation of *He Walked by Night* stylistic elements – and the internal focalization allows for a trustworthy narration of the case taken from the LAPD files. As Mittell says, “he is the most reliable of all possible first-person narrators, with no visible flaws, biases, or even emotions” (40). Repeating the same effect of the radio show, the audience has the impression that the narrator is basically reading an official police report in which all the actions have already taken place, thus leaving less room for alternative interpretations. Similarly, most of the episodes and dialogue scenes conclude with a moralistic phrase from detective Joe Friday – judging the past actions or making comments on the criminal acts – with “the two sweaty male fists that bang out the metal quasi- fascist Mark VII logo” (Sharrett 166), the symbol of Webb’s production company. Since it always plays a non-diegetic function, the iconic score also emphasizes the authoritative role and the words of Friday, stressing his courage and virtues, and it is used to mark the end of a scene by suggesting the progression of the investigation.

The semi-documentary style of *Dragnet* establishes the tone of the series from the beginning but it does not represent the only formal feature to which the show relates. This leads to another reflection concerning the difficulty of categorizing the TV series in a limited and precise genre. Some critics, such as Borde and Chaumeton, have objected that the American police-procedural documentary – with which *Dragnet* objectively shares some characteristics – is “in reality a documentary glorifying the police and there is nothing of this kind in *noir* films” (77). On the contrary, police officers in classic *noir* movies – e.g. John Huston’s *Asphalt Jungle* (1950) or Robert Montgomery’s *Lady in the Lake* (1947) – are often depicted as corrupt agents or even killers. In less extreme cases, private eyes or detectives with their individualism redress the deficiencies of the officers, as is the case of classic *noir* such as *Kiss me Deadly* (Aldrich 1955) or the vigilante figure of Brian Bendis’ *Daredevil* (2001-2006). On the other hand, *Dragnet* proves to be coherent with certain *noir* narratives, especially if we consider what J. Fred MacDonald calls the “Neo-realistic Detective phase”, in which the procedural aspect is stressed alongside a return to a realism and cynicism towards society. MacDonald suggests that this trend of the late 1940s parallels film *noir* through its presentation of crime as symptomatic of a larger societal malaise in the figure of the disillusioned and reluctant detective (Mittell 128).

It becomes clear that despite *Dragnet*’s incompatibility with a unique and definitive genre, it borrows elements from both classic film *noir* and semi-documentary *noir*, showing an awareness of the genre both in terms of contents and style. Considering the semi-documentary cycle to be rooted in films such as *The House on 92<sup>nd</sup> Street* (Hathaway 1945) or *The Naked City* (Dassin 1942), one can observe how *Dragnet* maintains not only the same interest in the institutional forces of law (and its rhetoric) but also the rejection of the “psychic/sexual destabilization and emotional angst which are integral to many of the ‘tough’ thrillers” (Krutnik 204), i.e. the classic hard-boiled form of *noir* that dominated the 40s *noir* scene. This latter point, as I will show, is crucial to my analysis of *Dragnet* with regard to the representation of masculinity, family and, more generally, the encoded meanings and ideology behind the narrative.

Moreover, I regard the style and directing techniques to be in line with the tone and intentions of Webb’s work. Minimal camera movements, a clean scene and quasi-invisible editing help to emphasize the naturalism, so that “the primary effect of the show’s style is again to highlight procedures over

characters, facts over emotions, and rigid order over chaotic crime” (Mittell 145). To this end, the standard *Dragnet* sequence consists exclusively of close-up, reiterated long shots, reneging on the classic Hollywood medium shot, thus adapting the former radio episodes to 30 minutes of quite fast visual narrative. Also in this case, different visual styles are eventually used in the same 30 minutes episode; while the program’s intention is to create a realist narrative, its style moves away from the zero-degree narration typical of cinema realism. The show in fact also references hard-boiled detective dramas, with similar first-person narration and cynical portrayals of social problems, “but through its mixture with semi-documentary authenticity, these assumptions often linked to film noir lose their association with noir’s moral ambiguity, becoming firmly ensconced within clear distinctions between right and wrong” (Mittell 139). Boosting the realism effect, *Dragnet’s* narrative leads to a constant binarity, fostering evaluation and a kind of educational tone, especially when the rhetoric of law enforcement and the Los Angeles myth of security are employed.

Starting from this premise – considering Webb’s cultural background, the variety of noir influences and institutional support behind the show – it is easier to activate discourses on the interpretation, ideology and representations of the society depicted in *Dragnet*, with particular attention to the domestic imagery created in post-war America and to the work-oriented and self-sufficient masculinity typical of noir narratives.

#### “THE BIG FAMILY” (1955): DOMESTIC CONTAINMENT AND COLD WAR NARRATIVES

Post-War America was characterized by a general trend towards conformity and domestic containment, in which men and women had precise roles in society, specific models to follow. The common message of postwar film and television, therefore, was “that America was the happiest place on Earth for those who adhered to strict limitations on what constituted happiness and were also able to believe that institutional injustice, authoritarian clergy, dogmatic teachers, and sadistic police were rare to nonexistent” (Nadel 8).

Lynn Spigel, in her essay *Make Room for TV* (1992), has analysed the way in which television in the 1950s intervened in shaping gender roles in American society and the way it drew on those roles to establish its round-the-clock

presence in the American household. As the postwar suburban home became a site of female labour, television adapted its programming to accommodate women's daytime domestic routines: "By the 1950s, televisions were selling at a rate of over 5 million a year. Television also fostered the classless ideal. Commercials extended the reach of advertising into people's homes, as did the abundant lifestyles portrayed on the screen" (May 163). As stated by the feminist writer Betty Friedan, in post-war American families "polio and smallpox were replaced by depression and alcoholism", and the American way of life reflected the image of pop-cultural products:

Consider the terms of women's new empowerment, the startling changes since that time I wrote about, only three decades ago, when women were defined only in sexual relation to men – man's wife, sex object, mother, housewife – and never as persons defining themselves by their own actions in society. That image, which I called "the feminine mystique," was so pervasive, coming at us from the women's magazines, the movies, the television commercials. (Friedan 15)

According to Friedan, the roots of the problem lay in a society that imposed a specific model for women to follow and that publicized education and professional achievement for women as undesirable, while at the same time celebrating women's "natural" role as nurturers and companions. A woman's guiding principle was that of the nurturer: she was wife, mother, and homemaker. Her self-fulfilment came from childbearing and altruism.

On the other hand, men were the breadwinners, programmed to work out of the home and concentrate on their own success. If, on the one hand, "women were described as irrational, emotional, gentle, obedient, cheerful, dependent, men were, conversely, represented as rational, individualistic, unemotional, solid, and aggressive" (Carosso 72). In *Modern Women: The Lost Sex*, Farnham and Lundberg argued that modern women were unhappy and uncertain precisely because they had neglected their womanly roles, i.e., their natural state.

Not surprisingly, what today we define as Cold War narratives have fundamental elements such as "fears of a masculine decline and the spectres of female alienation" (Carosso 128); the common message of Post-War America – albeit heavily influenced by noir aesthetics with black and white episodes – is conveyed in a relevant way also in the original edition of Jack Webb's *Dragnet*, which aired from 1951 to 1958 (8 seasons). The seasons took a documentary approach, narrating real LAPD cases through the lens of Joe Friday (Jack

Webb) and his partner Officer Frank Smith (Ben Alexander); every episode has the same formula as well as the title (The Big...), clearly following the hard-boiled names tradition by echoing Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939).

The episode I analyze here – “The Big Family” (1955) – proves to be symptomatic not only of the dynamics of the 50s American society, but also serves as an example of the development of the genre into a television format, providing a pioneering role for the police procedural.

The episode starts with the story of an executive who leaves a suicide note in his car together with a pistol, two spent bullets and no trace of the body. Friday and Smith working Homicide and Missing Persons Detail, in an attempt to find the man, interrogate his family. It is precisely through the portrait of his family that the two police investigators will manage to find the man and understand the reason for his disappearance. As the narrative follows police procedure – Friday and Smith's working so hard under the rain that they can barely grab a coffee – it becomes clear that Mr. Jarrett didn't committed suicide and that the real focus of the investigation is shifting from the reason for his disappearance to the meaning of it.

However, right from the beginning of Friday's voiceover, the ideology of the narrative highlights Mr. Jarrett positive virtues, such as his being a “prominent, prosperous, great investor” while his wife, Mrs. Jarrett, is merely depicted as an “attractive woman”. Similarly, the attributes of their son Keith and daughter Evelyn are textually vehiculated in opposition to their father's qualities as a successful business man, devoted to his family's inherited “one million dollar concern” and, above all, a self-sufficient middle-aged man. When the two officers interrogate Mrs. Jarrett in her apartment, Friday emphasizes the “strong smell of liquor on her breath” and, indeed, the whole meeting is based on Mrs. Jarrett addiction to alcohol, demonstrated not only by her words and gestures but by the officers' look of disapproval:

Sgt. Friday: You know of any business troubles that might have upset him?

Mrs. Jarrett: No, Jack never discussed business with me. He had his own interests, children have their own interests, I guess I have mine. I drink, Sergeant, it's something to do, I drink every day in the week, I drink quite a bit since the children left, I don't blame them. Jack didn't care, I guess I don't care of myself anymore, we never were a family... Can't you go away and leave me alone? Can't you see that all I want is a little happiness. I don't care what I have to pay, just a little happiness.



Sgt. Friday: You won’t buy with it.

Mrs. Jarrett: Maybe. It doesn’t seem to matter too much to me.

Low-angle and documentary-style camera shots portraying Mrs. Jarrett’s binge drinking, with a full bottle of alcohol on the table, actually suggests, in the economy of the scene, the officers’ view of the “ma’am”<sup>2</sup> merely as an alcoholic and depressed solitary woman in her house, struggling for a “little happiness”. As she claims that since her children left she began to drink, Mrs. Jarrett’s identity emerges as fitting Friedan’s analysis of the “feminine mystique”, inasmuch as her fulfillment was strictly related to her role of “nurturer and child bearer” (Friedan 69).

When the son Keith, a young tennis player, is asked by Friday about a good reason why his father wanted to take his own life, he answers: “Have you met my mother?”, implicitly blaming her for the collapse of the family. The narration of the procedure – with the well-built crescendo typical of the classic detective story – leads to what amounts to a final act of redemption for Mr. Jarrett as regards his suicide gesture. In fact, he is found in Oregon where he is enjoying his freedom “doing some fishing, learning to cook and travelling”; the man’s final explanation for his disappearance is exactly the same as the viewer is led to expect throughout the episode, namely that Mr. Jarrett escaped from a disappointing and dysfunctional family that does not reflect his values.

Mr. Jarrett: Have you met my wife? My son? My daughter? And you know, my wife’s been an alcoholic for eight years...why be polite...she’s a drunk. My son is a tennis bum, there’s no other word for that. My daughter, you know as well as I do, two divorces, different boyfriend every week. I worked hard for my family, sergeant, I was proud of that once, but what would you do if they turned out the way they have?... I got tired of it, maybe I’m just getting old. [...] Well, there’s nothing more to tell, officers, I worked most of my life for my family, two vacations in 20 years, I tried to do everything I could for them. They are rotting apart, sergeant, all three of them, I didn’t want to stand around and watch them rotten, that’s why I left [...] It gets lonely sometimes.

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<sup>2</sup> There is a repeated back-and-forth of the honorifics, namely Sgt vs Ma’am, emphasizing the roles and the authority in the scene. I suggest here the reading of Natalie Angier’s interesting article (appeared in *The New York Times* about the term “ma’am” and its cultural values also from a social and feminist prospective.

<<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/29/weekinreview/29angier.html>>

Sgt. Friday: What are you going to do now?

Mr. Jarrett: I don't know yet. Maybe I drive up the highway, take a look at Alaska, great country up there, doing some fishing...great country we live in, officers... [...] Would you like to stay for dinner? I'm learning to cook.

What the viewer discovers at the end of the episode, after Mr. Jarrett's monologue, is that the solution of the mystery lies exactly in Mr. Jarrett's reasons for "getting lost", those of a man who has worked hard all his life and whose family has betrayed his values. He is disappointed in his wife for her addiction and unhappy life; he calls his son "a tennis bum" – tennis here is depicted as the symbol of middle-upper class idleness – because of his refusal to follow in his father's footsteps and he is ashamed of his daughter Evelyn "twice married, twice divorced", showing a generation gap current in the 50s and 60s American families (and that I will make more explicit in the analysis of the 60s episode in the next paragraph). Both the female figures of this episode, Mrs. Jarrett and Evelyn, are represented as frivolous, the former intent on admiring the carnations, the latter petting and combing her ponytail-wearing dog. However, the critical point of the episode is in fact not so much in the representation of the family itself but in its being a symptom of the personality of the *pater familias*; the investigations of Friday and Smith are in this case a way to endorse, if not to justify, his disappearance with no interest in carrying on an exhaustive narration of his wife and "grown children" reasons. Moreover, what emerges from the final confrontation between the man and the two officers is a kind of comradely sympathy for Mr. Jarrett's situation; the officers' understanding attitude during Mr. Jarrett's monologue emphasizes not only the legal innocence of the man – with Sgt. Friday's final assertion "it is no crime to get lost" – but also the moral one.

This brings me to another reflection about the representation of the man and his general virtues that emerges from the *Dragnet* narrative; while Mrs. Jarrett fits into Friedan's depiction of a homemaker, companion and depressed wife, Mr. Jarrett and Sgt. Joe Friday show themselves as sharing similar ethics to the ones on which the ideology of "The Big Family" (1955) episode is built. Despite the fact that during the 50s American society promoted values such as family togetherness, both the male protagonists of this episode share a work-oriented masculinity that characterizes their agency. In *Dragnet*, there is in

fact a recurrent depiction of the male as a self-sufficient human being, an authoritative, heavy-smoking breadwinner.<sup>3</sup>

Joe Friday, unlike his police partners, is not married and he rarely dates women; the way he demonstrates his masculinity is only through his comments about the investigations and his emotional distance. All Friday’s agency and role in the narrative is related to his work and his personality mirrors that of the ideal police officer. Embodying what Kathleen Gerson (1993) calls “autonomous masculinity”, Friday shows no interest in parenting and domesticity (“involved masculinity”), nor is his work a means of providing for his family (“breadwinning masculinity”). Although this may seem odd since in 50s America an unmarried man was considered unhappy or homosexual (Mintz 180), Friday’s convinced bachelorhood may derive from his belonging to an older literary tradition of the lone man, secure in his masculinity but without family ties, a characterization typical of the private-eye/hardboiled detective. In his case – as many male officers in the police force show – women, emotional involvement or marriage could be synonyms of distraction from his work and moral integrity as an officer. As the scholar Julie D’Acci (1994) suggests, the separation from women of cop heroes makes them worthier stand-ins for the law, as they epitomize a more pure, independent form of masculinity.

“THE BIG DEPARTURE” (1968): TV AND IDEOLOGY IN LATE 60S LOS ANGELES

*“I don’t know, Joe. When we were growing up, we saw things as black and white, right and wrong. Kids today just seem to look at everything as various shades of gray.”*

— Bill Gannon, *Dragnet*, 1969

When the second edition of *Dragnet* was aired in 1967, after an eight-year break, Jack Webb showed an obvious attempt to face the changes and the issues of Los Angeles 60s society. The tube was now saturated with colours

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<sup>3</sup> Jack Webb was also the face of the advertising campaigns of many cigarette companies (Fatima, Chesterfield) and the tobacco conglomerate Liggett & Myers sponsored the radio show and then the TV version. Cigarettes in the show are undoubtedly emblematic of Friday’s hardboiled urban masculinity and Webb appeared in poster ads, “and eventually in TV ads, momentarily coming out of character to address the audience directly” (Sabin 17).

and the counterculture was clearly operating in “various shades of gray” rather than in Dragnet’s black-and-white world.

While the imprinting and the ideological approach of the series remained the same, the themes and the questions addressed in the 98 episodes (January 12, 1967, to April 16, 1970) were symptomatic of LAPD anxieties about L.A. countercultural values, the spread of drug use<sup>4</sup> and the hippie culture. The peacekeeping and security measures adopted by the police were heavily questioned, especially after the handling of the 1965 Watts Riots, several corruption scandals and the defense of COINTELPRO, the (domestic) spy program started by FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover in the 1950s. In the counterculture movement of the 1960s, Webb found quite a bit of material that inspired many of the program’s antagonists for several episodes (such as “The LSD Story” or “The Big Prophet”); hippies, protestors, pot smokers, black militants, liberal intellectuals, and a gaggle of miscellaneous “social misfits” are now the core of the investigations. “Joe Friday in the 1960s also confronts thieves, killers, and bunko artists, but these villains are not nearly as compelling, nor as savagely caricatured, as the symbols of social upheaval that Webb so ardently despises” (Sharrett 167).

What had been the ideological assumptions behind the show’s first season, were now basically reinforced in the name of Cold War government rhetoric and conservative ideals; on the other hand, “whereas viewers may have accepted the show’s police-centred moral clarity in the 1950s, the changing role of the police as participants in social disorder had pushed the credibility limits of Dragnet’s authenticated voice of authority” (Mittell 149).

What emerges from the new episodes of *Dragnet 1967* – as the episode “The LSD Story” clearly shows – is not only a television representation of the War on Drugs motives which prompted the 1970 Control Act but also of an important generational debate between those who believed in America and its institutions as the happiest place on Earth and those who did not. Besides, as Alan Nadel claims in his *Demographic Angst*:

If the premise that America suffered from malaise, ennui, joylessness, and passivity was correct, then perhaps the simplest explanation for the cultural revolution of

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<sup>4</sup> In the 1967 episode “The LSD Story”, the young dooper Blue Boy during one of his drug trips mumbles, “Brown, blue, yellow, green, lavender, pink, orange, red, red-red and red... I can hear them. I can hear them all”, reflecting the importance of colors related to the hippie and drug culture vs. the black-and-white cops’ world.

the late 1960s is that the generation that grew up during this limp and tepid era thought it was about time to enjoy prosperity. The formative years of the baby boomers manifest great disparity between the ebullient exceptionalism of the Cold War propaganda factory and the alleged joylessness of its producers and consumers. (8)

Yet, this generational debate derives from the activation of a certain polarisation of values that spread through the U.S. during the 50s and 60s Post War period and it also provides the basis for the storyline of many *Dragnet* episodes, including “The Big Departure” (1968), aired on March 7, where the L.A. social turmoil which the police attempted to contain is presented in the episode as a naïve juvenile crime or whim.

“The Big Departure” narrates a case in which Joe Friday and his partner Bill Gannon are grappling with a few teenagers who want to start their own form of social organization on an island off the coast of California. For this purpose, they start to steal food and equipment from local stores when they are caught by the police. Much of the episode’s narrative deals not so much with the process of investigation as with the long interrogation that unfolds in a LAPD interview room; this conversation-as-plot episode shows a confrontation between the two officers and the juveniles, Charles L. Vail<sup>5</sup>, Dennis J. Meldon and Paul Seaver.

Jack Webb’s voiceover narration relates that since the individual interviews have been a failure, they started a group interview, a move that clearly shows how from the police point of view the identity and dignity of the juveniles are more linked to a gang affiliation rather than to their individuality. In fact, the narrative sets the tone for a binary representation, the juveniles with their new hippie values vs the conservative policemen. Since it is easy to guess the predominant side in the ideological and political transmission of meanings, what is interesting is the way in which the representation of the hippie values is actually a downsizing operation of the phenomenon which is repressed by Sgt. Joe Friday’s voice of authority in the name of his idea of society and justice. Friday and Gannon then remind the boys that there’s no way their utopian dream of building another kind of society (non-materialistic, non-patriarchal, non-capitalistic) will work, and that “they don’t know anything about the real world”.

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<sup>5</sup> Charles is also called by Gannon “Charlie” and the juveniles’ look is somewhat evocative of Charles Manson and his family.

Friday and Gannon proceed to scold the young men for not appreciating all that the United States can offer them, and how great their country is compared to everywhere else:

Sgt. Friday: The fact is, more people are living better right here than anyone else ever before in history. So don't expect us to roll over and play dead when you say you're dissatisfied. It's not perfect, but it's a great deal better than when we grew up.

Boosting a binary representation of youthful angst against the establishment or the rhetoric of the countercultural villains vs. the good policemen, the narrative choices aim to weaken the hippies' monologues and invigorate Webb and Gannon's speech.

Dennis, while trying to defend his countercultural idea of life, claims that his family "has no values" and that he and his friends want to dedicate themselves to "the attainment of freedom expression without no qualification for the human spirit into total renunciation of material values":

Dennis: We've organized a new society, with a new order of things... getting rid of materialistic values.

Sgt. Friday: Where do you plan to set up this utopia?

Dennis: We got a place.

Sgt. Friday: Where?

Dennis: I Can't tell you that...that's a perfect form of government.

Sgt. Friday: Nobody's ever made it work.

Utopia is the word Joe chooses to call the hippies' would-be society, a term that has always been related not only to the countercultural movement but above all to the communist regime. In fact, this dialogue is not just related to a generational debate but also to Webb's clear anxiety to divert them from their utopia. What Webb is defending is not only the idea of American government and its conservative ideals but above all a received idea of family and justice.

When one thinks of *Dragnet* one must take into consideration the general public it was addressed to; the show aired every Thursday at 9:30–10:00 pm (EST) and it was supposed to be seen after family dinners on a three channels

television<sup>6</sup>. *Dragnet*'s educational purpose was clear as “the television turned out to be a medium that did not so much represent America...as it rather ended up projecting a new vision of normality to which the nation could aspire” (Carosso 2012, 83).

“The Big Departure” in fact appears to be not so much an invitation not to join any cult, as a representation of a nation – 60s America – in which forms of organization and systems of values other than capitalistic ones were to be condemned. *Dragnet* contributed to the operation of normality projected on the screen, the projection of American family life and of a “new people’s capitalism”. Therefore, the show was part of “only those kinds of shows which could be considered beneficial to family life, law and order, and ‘the American way’” (Sabin 16).

At the same time, Jack Webb embodies a precise idea of justice, deeply rooted in the LAPD and in the government rhetoric typical of the Cold War years. If, as Donatella Izzo claims, “la funzione retorica complessiva del poliziesco, sovraordinata alle diverse strategie dei singoli testi o dei singoli sottogeneri, è dunque quella di riconciliare il cittadino allo stato in nome di una fantasia di giustizia” (Izzo 4), what then is the fantasy of justice that can be found in *Dragnet*?

In “The Big Family” (1955) the binary representation of justice in the final resolution of events implies that the *pater familias* was “right” to leave his family who had betrayed his ideals as a middle class family man and, as a result, they “deserved” to suffer the consequences.

In “The Big Departure” (1968) the hippie protestors in the end are returned to their respective families after having left them to found their own community; Friday and Gannon’s final monologue not only reflects a generational and political debate that is on the side of the cops but that is also an invitation to morally commit to a specific idea of family; the officers encapsulate here what Mark Fisher defined the simultaneous and synchronized emergence of capitalist realism and domestic realism, and their co-implication: “the idea that there’s no alternative to capitalism and there’s no alternative to the family either” (102). In other words, the reiteration of Cold War rhetoric

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<sup>6</sup> The three original networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC—had in fact a kind of oligopoly in the American television industry up to the 1980s, though Home Box Office (HBO) began offering its subscribers recently released movies, uncut and commercial-free, months or years before the broadcasting stations would air those same films edited for time and content restraints and interrupted by advertisements.

in *Dragnet* assumes a dual significance; one political and legal – intimately connected with the Red Scare<sup>7</sup> – and one that I would define as ethical. In both the episodes the infringement of the law is always minor as compared to the ethical shortcomings. The emphasis placed on the ingrained, conservative moral and cultural values of 50s-60s American society, make it easy for the viewer to embrace a specific idea of justice, that coincides perfectly with Jack Webb's one. In fact, since it is true that during the 60s the LAPD was losing control of the populace due to current events, then Jack Webb was the very figure to reinstate the police image, and not so much through teamwork as thanks to his personal ability and sensibility.<sup>8</sup>

This brings me to another reflection about the absence of police violence in *Dragnet 1967* – what Mike Davis describes as “a vengeful reign of terror by the LAPD” (211) – in the representation of the Civil Rights Movement and law enforcement. In “The Big Departure”, the moment of the encounter between the “good force” and the “evil force” is barely represented; on the contrary what is boosted is precisely the police's ability to handle the situation a posteriori, precisely in the LAPD interview room, where Friday and Gannon feel much more confident than the criminals. As Mittel claims:

Webb kept gunplay and violence to a minimum on the show, while he claimed that this was part of his quest for authenticity, as violence was over-represented on crime dramas versus real police work, one effect of downplaying portrayals of violence and crime on *Dragnet* is to minimize moments in the text in which the social order upheld by the police is threatened, questioned, or undermined. (142)

An overall view of *Dragnet 1967* would confirm, in my opinion, that this second edition of the show seems to be much more a defence of the police than an attempt to promote its image. As the Sixties political climate was becoming increasingly hostile, several episodes showed the police's attempt to demonstrate its benign intentions, like in the 1969 episode “Intelligence

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<sup>7</sup> Jack Webb was also the narrator in the anti-communist propaganda short film *Red Nightmare* (1962) directed by George Waggner, recently featured in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Inherent Vice* (2014).

<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, Mittel points out that in the US in the 1970s, a new form of the police procedural emerged and became dominant, one that focused more on the abilities of unique, charismatic police officers rather than the inevitable success of law enforcement as an entire system.



DR-34” (1969) in which Webb claims “I wear a badge, Paul – not a swastika”. This retort occurs, in fact, after Paul Reed (Peter Duryea), complains about the Department spurning “help” from the likes of the Fielder Militia, a paramilitary organization (Duryea) Reed is actually considering joining, in order to handle Civil Rights protestors:

Sgt. Friday: “Patriotism? That militia of yours has got a corner on the market! Civil rights? They got ’em all! Protesters? Shoot ’em all down! That may be your philosophy, Paul, but it’s not mine, and I don’t think it’s the Department’s either. We work it a little different in this country.”

Duryea: “What do you mean?”

Sgt. Friday: “I wear a badge, Paul – not a swastika.”

“I carry a badge” is also a standard claim of Joe Friday’s opening monologue in the 60s edition of *Dragnet*. This monologue met with protest from the LAPD, who objected to the term “cop.” After the first few seasons of *Dragnet*, the LAPD convinced Webb to change the phrase to “I work here – I carry a badge” (Domanick 125), also echoing the former alternative title of the show “Badge 714”. The badge is in fact not only the symbol of the *Dragnet* franchise but it also comes across as the emblem of Friday’s responsibility ethics – something to “carry” – as well as of the iconic representation of his authority.

Although Friday’s partner, Gannon, is also wearing the same badge, his agency in the narration is less related to a sense of responsibility. Gannon’s role as sidekick in the series is also much less serious than that of former partner Sgt Smith’s character in the first edition of the show. He is (also) entrusted with a comic side in that he is a happy family man who likes eating and complaining about his aches and pains while Friday simply drinks coffee and smokes cigarettes; as a result, Friday’s masculinity in *Dragnet 1967* seems more pronounced by his coming across as a “confirmed bachelor, as superior to feminized family man Bill Gannon” (Sharrett 168). Moreover, the comic side of Gannon’s character is emphasized in the film version of *Dragnet* (Mankiewicz 1987), in which Tom Hanks plays what is almost a parody of Friday’s sidekick. Regardless of stylistic choices, the film’s weak narrative and lack of popularity reflect the importance of the serialization of *Dragnet*, not only because of the popular appeal of the medium (radio, TV) but because of its reassuring message. Now that the LAPD were able to enter not only the

public sphere (in the streets) but also the private sphere of people's homes (through the TV), citizens could believe they were living in the safest city and "with the best police force in the world" thanks to whom society could "protect the innocent".

In other words, *Dragnet* also played an important redemptive role, whereby people could accept – or justify – police work in the L.A. area whether it was bad or good, mainly thanks to Webb's figure and his unquestionable work ethic and affable approach. Not surprisingly, the show was recognized by the media at a time when the police force was pushing its PR and when Webb died in 1982 he was given a funeral with full police honours (Sabin 20). As Mittel claims, "*Dragnet's* ideology is not an idealized vision of society as presented in idyllic sitcoms, but the authenticated and unswerving belief in the system to continually discipline offenders and protect the innocent" (139).

Despite its fiery conservative rhetoric, Webb's *Dragnet* was able to offer a singular and groundbreaking narrative, both in terms of style and medium, portraying the Cold War era in a coherent and varied light, and ultimately establishing an enduring rapport between the institution/author and the society/spectator. Yet, behind "just the facts" what remains is the problem of interpreting the facts, with the awareness that facts can be stranger than fiction and that no noir narrative is ever entirely free from political or ideological implications.

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