Why we love Mad Men

In this age of over-regulation, who are the real Mad Men, asks Alan Anderson.
gorgeous cast, flawlessly recreated settings and styles, and the backdrop of one of the most interesting periods in modern American history: there are many reasons why the TV show Mad Men has been such a hit. Perhaps the most compelling is the portrayal of the cultural and political environment of the late 1950s and early 1960s, which contrasts, often pleasingly, with the present day.

To the contemporary viewer, a visit to the America of Mad Men is like a trip to some exotic country where the usual rules have been turned on their heads. The overweening regulation of the nanny state is absent, evoking the same feeling of liberation I recall from a bare-headed motorcycle ride during a youthful backpacking jaunt in Vietnam.

Cleverly, the show’s writers have chosen not to preach to us through facile examples of desirable freedoms we have lost but, by adopting the opposite approach, forced us to ponder for ourselves what we lose when we allow governments to think for us. Casual littering, an indifferent attitude to moderate drink-driving and ubiquitous and unrestricted smoking strike us as socially confronting, until we venture into the developing world and observe a different register of social priorities. For those without time to make the trip, Mad Men performs a similar service.

Contrasting brilliantly with this image of luminous individualism is the all-enveloping cultural conformity, expressed in scenes of church and country club. To the modern liberal, it seems almost incredible that, of all people, Marlboro Man was such a prisoner of societal strictures. The conservative social mores, almost comical today, underpin a public relationship between the sexes that cannot fail to appall any progressive thinkers among us who can bring themselves to watch the show.

Yet watch it we do, not in horrified fascination, but with affection, tinged with disquiet. For the America of Mad Men, while flawed, throws into stark relief the unique idiosyncrasies of our own age.

Mad regulation

Most jarring to the contemporary viewer of Mad Men is the prevalence and acceptability of alcohol in the workplace and the omnipresent cigarettes. Indeed, Sterling Cooper, the Madison Avenue advertising agency around which the show is centered (hence ‘Mad Men’), boasts as a client Lucky Strike

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cigarettes.

Even the savvy, street-smart executives at Sterling Cooper could never have dreamed of the war that was to be waged against the tobacco companies over the next fifty years—a war that would spread in time to other ‘sin’ industries.

There has been a seismic shift in cultural attitudes to tobacco and other products such as alcohol and junk food in Western society over the past several decades. Much of this has been driven by improved scientific knowledge about our bodies and how best to look after them. Indeed, in a harbinger of these developments, Sterling Cooper is tasked by Lucky Strike to develop a substitute for the positive health claims that were previously the mainstay of their advertising message.

Yet the regulatory Jihad against tobacco and alcohol is evidence of more than increased public awareness. Mad Men is warning us that while it is one thing to ban false advertising, it is quite another to ban advertising altogether.

And this is a warning we should heed. The creeping tide of ‘sin’ regulation has seen the gradual prohibition of tobacco advertising, culminating in the proposed ban on branded cigarette packaging. Similarly, the Labor Government’s Preventative Health Taskforce recently issued a fatwa on alcohol advertising, suggesting that the future of tobacco advertising awaits it. Restrictions on ‘junk food’ advertising feature prominently in the policy agenda of the Left.

Nor are advertising bans the only weapons in the state’s arsenal. Years of increases in tobacco and alcohol taxes have been buttressed with the alcopops tax, a levy which extends the role of government from telling you how much to drink to telling you what flavour! A recent study showed, unsurprisingly, that this had done nothing to curb risky drinking in the target demographic.

This growing state intrusiveness represents an unwelcome revolution in the purpose of regulation, from the prevention of public vice to the imposition of private virtue, even as the state relieves us of personal responsibility for our own misdeeds.

Of course, ‘sin’ regulation existed in the America of Mad Men. But, as the series makes clear, the regulation was directed towards the maintenance of public morality.

For instance, the boys from Sterling Cooper pay a visit to an underground casino, bribing their way in the door. Government felt it had a legitimate interest in restricting public casinos, given the perceived immorality of gambling. Yet in the modern age, gambling regulation is directed at micromanaging the gambler, not the casino, although it co-opts the latter as its unwilling agent. The proprietor is instructed to baby-sit the helpless gambler: watching out for ‘problem’ gamblers, restricting their credit, imposing time limits and generally relieving them of all responsibility for their own decisions.

Our supposed sins—intoxication, problem gambling, smoking pretty much anywhere—are visited less on ourselves than on the purveyor or the manufacturer. Cigarette companies, operating in strict compliance with the law, are demonised by politicians. Junk food advertisers are lambasted for their influence on the young, even as the responsibility of parents to educate their children is studiously ignored, or actively undermined.

Similarly, licensing laws seek to shift ever more responsibility from patrons to publicans. Instead of making the drinker responsible for his own consumption, then punishing him for drunken transgressions of public order, the modern approach threatens crippling fines against the proprietor for failing the often impossible task of assessing the drinker’s sobriety then applying the ever more unreasonable restrictions demanded by the law. The barman must now play nursemaid and social worker to his customers.

In Australia, the trend is particularly grim. Draconian laws forbid us to hold a drink while standing on the footpath outside venues, even in al fresco drinking areas, as if we cannot be trusted to raise our drinking arms while maintaining a vertical orientation.

It is ironic, but not surprising, that this growing regulatory wussery has coincided with a boom in alcohol-fuelled street violence. Having stipulated private virtue, and outsourced the policing of it to the ‘sin’ merchants, government has relieved the individual of responsibility for his actions.

Those who frequent Sydney or Melbourne nightspots will have noticed this attitude reflected in contemporary Australian policing practices, which see the boys in blue spending more time patrolling the safe interiors of trendy bars, enjoying the collateral benefit of a healthy serve of eye candy, than walking the beat outside like their predecessors in the time of Mad Men.

A government that cannot fulfill its most basic responsibilities, maintaining public order on the streets of our major cities, should surely resolve its own failings before seeking to micromanage our private affairs. Waging war against drinking in private premises, as a proxy for fighting crime in public places, captures the essence of the regressive revolution in regulation.
By contrast, the America of Mad Men seems a portrait of sanity and restraint. The Sterling Cooper executives happily slosh their way through a series of scotches without the slightest sign of wanting to ‘glass’ someone. And rather than trying to control their physiological and psychological indices with intrusive OHS laws, the state gets on with its traditional job of making sure they are not mugged on their way home.

The age of conformity

The complementary aspect of Mad Men that disconcerts us is the conformity of the characters to the social and religious mores of their community. At times in the series, even the most conservative viewer cannot but cringe at the obeisance paid to outmoded customs. What are we to make of this?

Again, the writers have adroitly provoked us into examining our own equivalent relationships, while reminding us that the burden of social convention must not be measured in isolation from the prevailing ills which it once mitigated.

Unlike the brazen denunciations of traditional families mounted in liberal diatribes like the movie American Beauty, the gentle mockery of 1950s ‘family values’ hypocrisy in Mad Men is more nuanced and less judgmental. Infidelity, bigotry and marital disputes receive ample coverage. Yet Mad Men never truly forecloses the possibility that the pursuit of the traditional family ideal, while often frustrated by the imperfectability of its characters, leads to a better life for them and their loved ones than the alternative of unconstrained hedonism that breaks out in their weaker moments.

Nor are the women behind the Mad Men picture-book Suzie Homemakers, for all that they pretend to be in public. In the privacy of the home, Mad Men portrays complex adult relationships with emotional depth and shifting balances of power. In doing so, it puts the lie to the modern myth that ‘family values’ are a code for the unqualified subjugation of women.

None of this is to deny the obvious net benefit of empowering the female half of the population to pursue career aspirations and escape the tyranny of the glass ceiling. But the much-remarked retreat of the younger generation of women today from the malignant denialism of the sisterhood, into a more realistic appraisal of the trade-offs that must be made between work and motherhood, suggests that we would be unwise to hold the traditional view of the family in the unremitting disdain popular amongst the social policy academy.

In our own time, confronted with the miseries of a welfare state built on the wreckage of the traditional family, we are reminded that it is dangerous to be wholly critical of the discarded social mores of the past. The proven correlations between illegitimacy and economic disenfranchise-ment, substance abuse and child abuse should surely give modern policy-makers pause for thought.

Tragically repetitious child protection scandals across our states and territories, an army of children in foster care and an explosion of single-parent families on welfare are the baseline against which we must measure the costs and benefits of the conservative social attitudes that once partially constrained these problems, even at the expense of hidden domestic frustrations and sexual hypocrisies.

Equally, while few lament the demise of female exclusion from the workforce, we are provoked to ask ourselves whether we have thrown out the baby with the
bath water, so to speak. Have we, in our rush from judgment, underestimated the role played by social norms concerning the value of a stable home, a father and a mother in the upbringing of children? If so, Mad Men hints, we have done so to our detriment.

Outside the home, social expectation plays a far greater role in defining the conduct of the Mad Men than it does in the West today. Don Draper’s creative team wait, albeit impatiently, for their boss’s arrival at a meeting before they attack the boardroom sandwiches. Draper himself implicitly corrects a young man in the elevator, guilty of lewd conversation in the presence of a lady, by instructing, then compelling, him to remove his hat.

Like ostensible conformity to family values, the quaint courtesies of the Mad Men world should not be judged in isolation. They reflect a world in which the values of the community provided a gentler, more subtle substitute for the rigid coercive mechanisms of the state. Instead of social opprobrium or mild corrective humiliation, inappropriate comments are nowadays a matter for external legal action. The commonsense discretion inherent in the enforcement of informal community norms has been replaced with the inefficient and unreasonable legalism of the hyper-regulatory state.

Thus, while we are shocked by the sexually harassing behaviour of the Mad Men in the workplace, and react instinctively with disappointment that their sense of decency does not restrain them, we find ourselves challenging the system we have put in its place—a system which countenances a claim of battery and a $37 million lawsuit over the flicking of a bra strap. The case makes itself: formal mechanisms are a poor substitute for informal norms of behaviour, and the modern contempt for the latter gives rise to an increased need for the former.

Ironically, in relation to the most prominent vice in Mad Men, social norms result in far harsher treatment than we would expect today. When an alcoholic executive wets his pants and passes out in an office meeting, the partners instruct him to take a six month paid ‘leave of absence’ from which he is clearly intended not to return.

The freedom to manage one’s own alcohol consumption is complemented with a greater accountability for the outcome. Instead of ‘medicalising’ the condition and ‘socialising’ the costs, the Mad Men insist compassionately but firmly on personal responsibility. If their approach seems anachronistic to us, not to mention contrary to unfair dismissal laws, we should imagine how they would perceive our equanimity in the face of a burgeoning roll of disability support pensioners, even as public health continues paradoxically to improve.

Grown-up people, grown-up government

The distinct treatment of adults and children in Mad Men contrasts with the permissive parenting practices of today, which seek to foster independence in children by treating them like miniature adults and according them a generous subset of adult ‘rights’. In the show, children are treated with affection, but still as children, requir-
ing discipline and owing obedience.

When Don Draper sees an adult guest in his house slapping his son across the face, he demands to know, ‘What is going on here?’ Of course, his interest is in identifying his son’s misdemeanour, potentially for further punishment. The shared responsibility of adults to discipline the young has been eroded in the decades since; today the well-meaning guest would face criminal charges. The explosion in youth crime over the same period is no coincidence.

Another scene which defies our modern attitudes towards parenting involves Don Draper instructing his young daughter on how to make a cocktail for his adult guest. Far from treating her like an adult, Draper is reinforcing the distinction between adult and child, allowing her to assist in an adult rite in a manner that serves to emphasise her exclusion from it.

Just as the children of Mad Men are real children, the adults are real adults. It is no surprise that the show’s taciturn anti-hero, Don Draper, has become a sex symbol among young women today. His unapologetically masculine approach to the world contrasts with the effete boy-heroes of modern Hollywood. Beneath his steely demeanour lurks a profound compassion that expresses itself genuinely and without pretension.

Draper’s character is a personified rebus to the maudlin sentimentality of our Oprah-fied age. He conveys emotion manfully, without the need for the exhibitionist navel-gazing and ego-pampering of the self-help brigade. He is, above all, serious.

The seriousness of the adults in Mad Men is perhaps a function of the world in which they live. The Cold War is at its height: during the Cuban missile crisis, the characters go about their business under the pall of potential nuclear holocaust. The Civil Rights movement is mobilising against segregation, and the segregationists are fighting back with weapons up to and including murder. Government and politics are serious business.

Compare the decisions of an Eisenhower or a Kennedy with government today. While September 11 briefly roused the West back into moral seriousness, the sentiment quickly evaporated, along with any desire to address the underlying challenges. Government quickly lapsed into farcical airport confiscation of nail files as a substitute for real decisions.

Similarly lacking in substance are the civil rights campaigns of today’s West. In civil libertarian circles, the right to free expression has given way to the right not to be offended. State-mandated ‘tolerance’ takes the form of draconian prohibition of any speech interpreted by the sensitivity commissars as constituting racial or religious vilification. Instead of fighting for the rights of minorities to be included, today’s activists fight to pamper neosegregationist ethnic leaders with taxpayer funds so that they can promote specious narratives of victimhood.

Mad Men does not attack these modern lunacies directly—how could it, as such heights of folly were unimaginable in those days. What it does do is provide the reference, the datum, the yardstick by which we should gauge the calibre of our leaders and their ability to navigate the currents of human affairs.

With the yardstick provided, measurement is not difficult. The first Queen Elizabeth reassured her people that she had no desire to make windows into men’s souls. In the reign of the second, the British Government can think of nothing more important to do than just that, financing an army of bureaucrats to police the ‘sensitivity’ of Her Majesty’s subjects, even as it fails to address the serious problems of their growing addiction to welfare, deficit-spending and radical Islamism. President Barack Obama, Community-organiser-in-Chief, leads the global grievance-mongering, apologizing to whoever will listen for American transgressions, real, or much more commonly, imagined. Meanwhile, he responds to looming fiscal catastrophe with Monty Pythonesque programs like ‘Cash for Clunkers’.

Sadly, Australia has followed suit. A po-faced Prime Minister Gillard, asked to identify the toughest decision she has made in government, nominated the establishment of the ‘My School’ web site. Spare us!

Having regulated citizens like errant children, relieving them of the responsibilities of adulthood, we should not be surprised that our governments have become equally immature. We live, after all, in representative democracies.

That is why we are attracted to Mad Men, like a daughter to her mother’s make-up or a son to his father’s shaver. It reminds us of the lost promise of adulthood, of a time when citizens and governments were grown-up.

Mad Men is a common sense drama. Its portrayal of a world relatively free of stifling political correctness, hypersensitivity and nanny state regulation is an artful rebuke of these nonsensical post-modern predilections.

Mad Men is a conservative drama. It recognises the imperfectability of man and so treats its characters, their foibles and their hypocrisies with understanding and affection, even as the consequences of their sins are visited upon them. It critiques the social mores of its era, but largely does not find them wanting; rather, it finds wanting its protagonists, but accepts this as the price of their humanity.

Above all, Mad Men is an adult drama. It implicitly exhorts us to treat children as children, and grown-ups as grown-up. In the age of state-mandated infantilisation, this message is both necessary and urgent.