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Master of None Lacks Class

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I'm a big fan of Aziz Ansari. He was great on *Parks & Rec*. His stand-up is smart and entertaining. And he co-wrote a book ("[Modern Romance](#)") with sociologist Eric Klinenberg, which takes a sociological, and engaging, perspective towards understanding how dating has changed as a result of new technology and shifts in culture.

Ansari's new show *Master of None* debuted on Netflix this fall to [rave reviews](#), and I was excited to watch it for several reasons. The show has been [celebrated](#) for, among other things, capturing the dilemma's of being the [child of immigrants](#) in the US, the [diversity](#) of its cast, [challenging expectations](#) around race in the entertainment industry, and exposing [sexism](#). Indeed, *Master of None* has been [described](#) as "the new definitive millennial comedy," and is [said](#) to be capturing "the tropes of urban millennials to an almost pitch-perfect degree."

Almost. The successes of this show are many, and they should be celebrated. But with all of its successes, a problem with *Master of None*, especially with using it as a proxy for the reality of the millennial generation, is the way it glosses over social class and the economic precariousness many people of this generation struggle with every day. The characters live in beautiful, spacious apartments. School and loan debt is hardly mentioned. We never hear concerns about bills, or even the cost of drinks at the hip bars where the characters meet. In a show that addresses racism, sexism, diversity, and the immigrant-family experience so head on, the lack of attention to economic inequality or classism is striking.

Take the episode where Dev and his girlfriend move in with each other: as we follow the couple through the move-in and some of the ups and downs of the next year of the relationship, they never discuss their financial arrangements. How do they handle rent? Who pays for food? These financial concerns can be the trickiest issues to navigate in a relationship, especially in a place where rent costs are so high. But *Master of None*



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ignores them entirely.

Instead of showing characters making tough decisions about money, the series highlights their difficulty making minor choices: choosing a place to get tacos or which romantic interest to invite on a date. The characters are often paralyzed by a fear that as soon as they choose one thing, a better possibility will emerge. The show adeptly illuminates how the glut of online reviews and the wide variety of dating websites allow people to gather an almost endless amount of information about a restaurant or a person before making a choice. Perhaps this highlights the freedoms and opportunities available to millennials (and others who use the internet), but consumer choice does [not](#) alleviate poverty. Too much choice is only a problem for those with the resources to choose.

The series does acknowledge the uncertainty many millennials face on the employment front, but here, too, it ignores the real financial issues involved. Dev (the protagonist, played by Ansari) spends most of the season frustrated about his inconsistent acting career, but he doesn't seem concerned about being paid or paying bills. When he learns that his part was cut from a movie he had been working on for several months, a friend assures him, "Dude, look on the bright side – at least you got paid pretty well." Dev's response, "Not really. I was mainly doing it for the exposure." Dev is clearly searching for work he can be passionate about, not about making a living. When his career flounders and a relationship ends, he books a flight to Italy to explore his passion for pasta., the wisdom of Dev's choice is tough to evaluate, since we have no sense of his financial situation. How is he paying for the "pasta making school" he enrolled in? When the woman sitting beside him on the plane asks him if he decided to make this big move, "just like that," Dev confirms, "Just like that." For many millennials, making these kinds of choices is not so simple and any pursuit of passion at work often must be balanced by practical financial concerns.

In one episode, Dev's father does reprimand him. "You realize fun is a new thing, right? Fun is a luxury only your generation really has," his father reminds him. In interviews, Ansari [recognizes](#) that he and his peers often take for granted the sacrifices made by their parents, though the series offers little reflection on the privileges afforded by Dev's apparent financial situation. But the "fun" he pursues and even the choices he struggles to make represent luxuries that are not at all universal for his generation. In a show that has been noted for its social awareness in representing the lives and dilemmas of today's young adults, the lack of attention to the economic precariousness of millennials is disappointing.

In reality, financial insecurity is a primary concern for many millennials, especially those from the working class who can't rely on assistance from their parents. They [worry](#) about student loan debt, since many have taken on [large debt obligations](#) to pay for college. As per student rates of state and local spending on public higher education have decreased and the average cost of a public college degree has [about doubled](#) in the last 15 years, the perception of public higher education as an affordable means of social mobility is fading. According to the Institute for College Access and Success, "Seven in Ten seniors (69%) who graduated from public and nonprofit colleges in 2014 had student loan debt, with an average of \$28,950 per borrower.

Millennials are also having trouble finding [work](#) as the labor market they enter is increasingly competitive and demanding, while also less [stable](#). As a result, many millennials will spend at least some time laboring as members of the [precariat](#), in

underpaid jobs in service work and the sharing economy, which has a variety of negative social implications. For example, many are [not heading their own households](#), and as has been written about here, many are opting in to a “[politics of resentment](#).”

These dilemmas are built into the structure of our economy and are the reality millennials encounter every day. Despite all of the good work in *Master of None*, the series ignores these issues. If we are going to have a conversation about the circumstances of millennials, we have to acknowledge the very real struggles around student debt and economic insecurity they face. These struggles impact their opportunities and choices, and they ripple throughout wider society.

Colby King

Colby King is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Bridgewater State University who teaches and studies urban sociology and inequality with an emphasis on understanding place as a social structure shaping opportunities.