

WORKERS OF BIKINI BOTTOM UNITE: AN ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S MEDIA

THROUGH THE LENS OF MARXISM

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## ABSTRACT

**THESIS:** Workers of Bikini Bottom Unite: An Analysis of Children's Media Through the Lens of Marxism

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The following thesis is a critical analysis of children's media. The work that follows, argues that children's cartoons can carry complex latent messages when analyzed through the theoretical lens of Neo-Marxism. This thesis explores this theory by connecting characters within the show *SpongeBob SquarePants* to key terms related to Marxist theory and the evident class representation within the program. This thesis also briefly touches on other children's programs as well and how they also carry latent messages. The research concludes that children's programs have the power to deliver complex latent messages to their viewers when analyzed with the lens of Marxism.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	1
Chapters	
1. Introduction.....	3
A. Overview.....	3
B. Appropriation and Alienation.....	3
C. Cultural Significance.....	5
2. Review of Literature.....	7
A. Use of Latent Messages.....	7
B. Effects of Messages.....	8
C. Marxist Theory and Media.....	10
3. SpongeBob Analysis.....	12
A. Characters and Key Terms.....	12
B. Class Representation.....	21
4. Marxist Ideas and Other Media.....	25
A. Ed, Edd n Eddy.....	25
B. The Fairly OddParents.....	26
C. The Smurfs.....	29
5. Conclusion.....	32
6. References.....	36

## Chapter 1 Introduction

### Overview

Children's cartoons bring forth a great opportunity to present complex messages to young viewers in light-hearted ways. The work that follows explores the argument that children's media can relay powerful latent messages, especially when looked at through the lens of Neo-Marxism. It is important to use the specific lens of Neo-Marxism because, as it will be explained further later, Neo-Marxism is the more contemporary form of analysis that focuses on power status and social inequality (Definitions, n.d.). Neo-Marxism is an extension of traditional Marxist analysis, so, henceforth, any mention of Marxism should be assumed to fall under Neo-Marxist theory. The primary focus of this analysis is the television show *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Tibbitt et al. & Hillenburg et al., 1999). This program is the main topic of discussion because it is not only full of connections to Marxism but was also one of the most popular cartoons in the early 2000s and continues to be one of the most popular current cartoons with it reaching over 70 million demand expressions in March of 2021 (Stoll, 2021). It is undeniable that *SpongeBob* has reached an incredible number of viewers and they have been impacted by its messages.

### Alienation and Appropriation

Before delving too deep into the actual analysis there are a couple of Marxist terms that need to be addressed. Those key terms are appropriation and alienation. While these terms will be briefly touched upon later, it is important to have an understanding of the concepts beforehand as they greatly relate to the primary focus of the work that follows. Appropriation means "to utilize constructively, to build by incorporating; the

subject, whether stated or implied, is man's essential powers" (Ollman, 1972, p. 89). To put that in simpler terms, appropriation is the process in which a worker is no longer perceived as a person with value as a human being beyond the labor they contribute. Marx believed that a society under capitalism, much like most of the societies in the programs yet to be discussed, appropriation leads to "direct, one-sided gratification" (Ollman, 1972, pp. 91-92). In terms of working, a boss may take a worker who is seen as a wonderful person with incredible qualities beyond their profession, but they appropriate them only to be seen for the value of their labor, successfully dehumanizing them.

Alienation somewhat ties into appropriation. After a worker has been successfully appropriated by their boss, they can then be alienated. In Marxist terms, alienation is one of the damaging effects of capitalist production on a human being's physical and mental state as well as the social process of which they partake (Ollman, 1972, p. 131). Alienation is unique because it does not always look the same. According to Marx, forms of alienation differ depending on a person's class because their lifestyles and positions differ, but as expected, the working class's affliction is the most severe (Ollman, 1972, p. 132). Unlike most upper-class individuals, those in the working class are in jobs they need to make ends meet and it brings forth more opportunity for employers to exploit and alienate them. When a person has been successfully alienated under capitalism, they lose touch with human specificity and the qualities that make them human progressively disappear (Ollman, 1972, pp. 134-137). Alienation and appropriation are ever-present in a capitalist society and are greatly demonstrated in *SpongeBob SquarePants*.

## Cultural Significance

This topic is very significant not only because *SpongeBob* has impacted multiple generations of people, but also because it can be tied to the current political climate. When the lens of Neo-Marxism is applied to *SpongeBob Squarepants*, it exposes many flaws that are present in a society that is living under capitalism, specifically issues that laborers face and class disparities. Those problems also happen to be key platform points for political leaders that have impacted mainstream politics. Two politicians who made waves and gained a lot of supporters during their respective elections were Senator Bernie Sanders and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. Both of these politicians are progressive and want to combat issues that are incredibly present within *SpongeBob*.

Senator Bernie Sanders tackles issues regarding worker's rights. One of the key problems that will be discussed later is the unfair treatment of workers within the world of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. One of Senator Sanders' biggest platform points when he ran for the presidential nomination in 2020, was ensuring that there would be democracy in the workplace (Workplace Democracy, n.d.). He was very upfront about the importance of fairness and wanted to do all he could to make sure workers were not abused. His political website states,

“In order to strengthen America's middle-class, a Bernie Sanders administration will make it a priority to restore workers' rights to bargain for better wages, benefits, and working conditions. This is what the Workplace Democracy is all about.” (Workplace Democracy, n.d.)

Although he did not win the election, Senator Sanders' staunch support of worker's rights brought that issue to the forefront for younger generations.

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or "AOC," as she is more commonly known, cares deeply about eliminating class disparity. One of Representative Ocasio-Cortez's main beliefs, when she ran for her position in the U.S. House of Representatives in 2018, was that Americans should live in a "modern, moral and wealthy society" where no one is too poor to survive (Economic Equality, n.d.). Much like Senator Sanders, AOC is incredibly supportive of the working class. She has made it abundantly clear that she supports union rights, pay equity, and a wealth tax (Economic Equality, n.d.). Representative Ocasio-Cortez has become a very powerful voice supporting those who live paycheck to paycheck, and she wants to ensure that they get the resources they need to live.

These figures have helped ignite conversations about issues regarding class and workers' rights; the two primary topics of this analysis. These politicians especially resonate among Millennials and those in Gen Z, the same groups of people who grew up watching the golden age of *SpongeBob* (Astor, 2020; Lin, 2020; Valldares, 2019). For that reason, this analysis is incredibly relevant because it ties into issues that are regularly discussed within American politics and it is important to acknowledge how these real-life issues are presented in children's media. The goal of this research is to shed some light on how children's programs send messages regarding life in the workplace and how social classes are represented to young audiences.

## Chapter 2 Review of Literature

### Use of Latent Messages

In order to do a proper analysis of children's programming, it is important to understand latent messages and how they function. Latent messages are messages that are not obvious but develop as time passes underscoring the overt message (Collins, n.d.). Various forms of media have always been used as vehicles to carry latent messages. Latent messages use a method known as "subliminal priming" on their audiences. Subliminal priming is a form of unconscious cognition, where the stimuli are not being consciously perceived by the viewer (Hassin, 2013). This method of delivering a message is very useful, especially in film and television. It is theorized that, because of a viewer's suspension of disbelief, films can encourage social learning, which primes viewers to respond to messages activating latent personality traits and influence a person's thoughts and behaviors (Glas & Taylor, 2017; Henke et al., 2016).

Utilizing latent messages is a very casual way to deliver a message to an audience whether they know it or not. This practice is especially effective with film and television because they can have such a strong effect on an audience. Previous research has demonstrated that characters in films and television are not just fictional constructs that we use for mere enjoyment, but instead, they are often used as examples of behavior as well as someone with whom a person can identify or even empathize (Glas & Taylor, 2017). This bit of research is incredibly important because it demonstrates how the characters in television shows, that may seem nonsensical, could actually be displaying behavior that resonates with viewers and could potentially cause them to alter their own behaviors.

## Effects of Messages

Past films and television shows have been rather successful in delivering messages to their audiences. At one point in time, it was seen as controversial, but it is now generally accepted that many emotional and cognitive processes can happen in the absence of awareness (Cohen et al., 2012). The following research will examine the messages that are embedded in children's programming, specifically focusing on *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Tibbitt et al. & Hillenburg et al., 1999). While this research will not include data from testing subjects, the potential effects of the messages being received are important to consider for the analysis. A recent study has shown that there is a connection between causal processes through which media can affect critical personality dispositions and political attitudes (Glas & Taylor, 2017). This is very crucial due to the fact that children could possibly be influenced by the cartoon that they are regularly taking in. Some scholars believe that characters in cartoons could act as a child's primary or secondary agent of socialization, serving as a model for how they are supposed to act in the real world (Glas & Taylor, 2017). The theories regarding the idea that a program could have that effect on young audiences are interesting, but the findings of past research prove to be even more compelling.

In a meta-analysis covering thirty-four studies, researchers Marie-Louise Mares and Emory Woodard found that children who watched prosocial programs behaved significantly more positively or garnered more positive attitudes than children who did not view such programs (Mares & Woodard, 2010). It is evident from research that the stigma surrounding children watching cartoons and the idea that they are not beneficial for them is quite false. The study also pointed out that the more a child's personal

situation connects to the situation in the show, the more likely they will be to model their behavior after what is presented to them (Mares & Woodard, 2010). Research shows that what a child is viewing may very well impact them when they are at a very impressionable age.

Cartoons also have the potential to be educational for their young audiences. Research has found that children are attracted to cartoons much more than traditional ways of learning, due to the well-written scenarios, sounds, & visual effects (Habib & Soliman, 2015). It is understandable how that could be more engaging for a child, rather than a teacher lecturing in front of a chalkboard. It has also been discovered that while kids are viewing cartoons, there is a learning process that is going on where what they are consuming is influencing their mode of socialization with other children and even with the world in general (Habib & Soliman, 2015). It is fascinating that cartoons have the potential to act as a form of homeschooling for children that might not get certain experiences from a traditional classroom setting or their guardians.

The conclusion that was drawn from these studies is that television has the power to foster positive social interactions, encourage viewers to be more tolerant and helpful, and even be an outlet of education for some children (Mares & Woodard 2010; Habib & Soliman, 2017). Based on this prior research, it is evident that *SpongeBob SquarePants* not only has the power to teach children simple lessons like how to tie their shoes but also has the ability to present them a message of how they should behave as an employee in society. Arguably, *SpongeBob* sends a very powerful message when looked at through the lens of Marxism. This television program

demonstrates a great opportunity to delve into how class, labor, and need for wealth are represented in children's programming that has yet to be explored.

### **Marxist Theory and Media**

Marxist theory can be applied as a lens to help critically analyze structures within societies whether they are real or fictional. The art forms of film and television media share in the re-establishment of a mature Marxist aesthetic and have the ability to go beyond into many deeper questions of Marxist social and political theory (Kleinhans & Lesage, 1977). Using Marxist theory as a tool for media analysis is unique because of how it has evolved. Scholar Glyn Daly wrote, "Marxism is as such a part of history as any other discourse, and as such continues to undergo processes of innovation and change in order to deal with limitations and inconsistencies that would be inevitable with any historical enterprise," (Daly, 2006, p. 28). The idea that Marxist ideas are ever-changing with the times is important because it means that the theory can be applied to media from all sorts of time periods, even modern cartoons.

In the work that follows, it is argued that the cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants* demonstrates a latent message of worker exploitation and capitalist greed when examined through the lens of Marxism, specifically Neo-Marxism. Neo-Marxism is the contemporary method of analysis that is an extension of traditional Marxism, focusing on social inequality and power status (Definitions, n.d.). This specific lens is important to use because it takes the core ideas of Marxist theory and has built upon those ideas by focusing on issues that are still very prominent in society and media. Karl Marx discussed how a capitalist economy is first and foremost a power structure with the

basis of the structure being class oppression (Daly, 2006, p. 29). Such ideas are very prominent today within children's programming.

The research previously mentioned does an excellent job of explaining the function of latent messages and the role Marxist theory plays in analysis. While there is a plentiful amount of research in those areas, there is not an abundant amount of research specifically tailored to Neo-Marxist analysis of children's media, and thus this research aims to explore that missing area. By applying the lens of Neo-Marxism to a vast amount of *SpongeBob* and various other programs, it is evident that children's cartoons can deliver a mature latent message to their young audiences.

## Chapter 3 SpongeBob Analysis

### Characters and Key Terms

Through the lens of Marxism, it is evident that there is a clear structure within the town of Bikini Bottom. The most important inhabitants of this fictional, undersea world all fit very well into societal roles outlined by Karl Marx. Two terms to keep in mind for this analysis are the means of production and mode of production. The means of production are the elements and tools needed to produce goods and services such as land, labor, and capital, and the mode of production is the structure in which those tools are used in a society, such as capitalism or communism (Oxford, n.d.). Other terms to note, involve the main characters of *SpongeBob*. The character of Squidward is the representation of a member of the rebellious Proletariat, Mr. Krabs a member of the Bourgeoisie, and SpongeBob is an exploited worker, submitting to the ways of their capitalist society.

It is important to note that this show does come with some anomalies when it comes to the characters' behaviors within their society. While there may be some instances where Squidward might stray from his Proletariat position, it is a rarity. The work that follows highlights the behavior that is the most consistent and is the strongest representation of their positions of power within the societal structure. Each character clearly exemplifies their Neo-Marxist role through their words and actions within the show.

Squidward Tentacles is a perfect model for a member of the Proletariat. Proletarians are members of society that are wage laborers who have no means of production of their own, so they have to sell their labor power in order to survive (Engels & Marx, 1964). Squidward is the cashier at the popular fast-food restaurant in Bikini

Bottom, called The Krusty Krab. The restaurant is owned and managed by Eugene Krabs, more commonly known as Mr. Krabs, and his only other coworker is the fry cook, SpongeBob SquarePants. Unlike SpongeBob, Squidward is well aware of the fact that they are being exploited as employees and consistently speaks his mind about their working conditions.

Throughout the series, Squidward voices his concerns and grievances at his fast-food job, but he is especially vocal early on in the show. In the first season of *SpongeBob*, there is an episode dedicated to the Krusty Krab employees competing for employee of the month (Burns et al. & Hillenburg et al., 2000). SpongeBob is elated about the contest because he loves the recognition, but Squidward has a different opinion. Squidward tells SpongeBob that the employee of the month award is just a scam to make SpongeBob work harder without Mr. Krabs having to give him a raise (Burns et al. & Hillenburg et al., 2000). This is one of the first of many times that Squidward openly calls out Mr. Krabs' exploitative behavior.

One of the most powerful episodes within the series when looked at through the lens of Neo-Marxism occurs in the second season. The episode "Squid on Strike" sends a powerful message about workers rising against their employers to demand fair treatment, in this case, Squidward and SpongeBob taking a stand against Mr. Krabs. According to Marxist theory, for all to be equal, the need for capital needs to be eliminated, thus eliminating the need for wage-labor and exploitation (Ollman, 1972, p. 13). In this episode, Squidward tries to put a stop to Mr. Krabs' undying need for capital and demands that the exploitation ceases.

The episode begins with Mr. Krabs discovering that profits have been lower than usual. Due to this newfound lack of money, Krabs decides to bill his employees for doing normal things like talking, chewing, breathing, and even existing. This action by Mr. Krabs causes Squidward to become so fed up that he demands he and SpongeBob go on strike. Squidward proclaims "We are workers united" and SpongeBob joins him in a protest saying they will not return until they are treated fairly (Dohrn et al. & Tibbitt, 2001). This episode also contains one of the few times SpongeBob is vocal about their unfair treatment. He chants "Krusty Krab is unfair, Mr. Krabs is in there, standing at the concession, plotting, his oppression," (Dohrn et al. & Tibbitt, 2001). While he does admit those are the words Squidward told him to say, they send a powerful message, nonetheless. The highlight of this episode comes from Squidward's impassioned speech to the masses of Bikini Bottom citizens. In his speech he states,

"The gentle laborer shall no longer suffer from the noxious greed of Mr. Krabs! We'll dismantle oppression board by board! We'll saw the foundation of big business in half, even if it takes an eternity...With your support, we will send the hammer of the people's will crashing through the windows of Mr. Krabs' house of servitude!" (Dohrn et al. & Tibbitt, 2001)

This speech greatly embodies Marxist ideas. It is clear that Squidward is a representative of the frustrated working class, longing to be free of his oppressive employer.

His speech briefly energizes the citizens of Bikini Bottom, but unfortunately, they do not follow through with the protest. Once he finishes speaking, they all realize how hungry they are and trample Squidward to get into the Krusty Krab. After being stepped

on, Squidward says “Nobody gives a care about the fate of labor as long as they can get their instant gratification” (Dohrn et al. & Tibbitt, 2001). That quote exemplifies how people function within the societal structure of Bikini Bottom and is reflective of the struggles a Proletarian worker faces in a society fraught with capitalism.

On the opposite end of the class spectrum is Mr. Krabs, who represents the Bourgeoisie. The Bourgeoisie is described as “people within the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of production and employers of wage-labor” (Engles & Marx, 1964). When looked at through the lens of Neo-Marxism, Mr. Krabs is the antagonist in the capitalist society of Bikini Bottom. According to Karl Marx, Capitalism is a mode of production that revolves around a basic struggle between the two fundamental classes: the Bourgeoisie and the Proletariat (Daly, 2006, p. 29). Squidward and Mr. Krabs are prime examples of that opposition throughout the series.

Eugene Krabs is shown to have an obsession with money from a very young age. One of his earliest examples of greed was when as a child, Krabs’ would routinely use quarters attached to strings in order to not waste twenty-five cents on a soda (Drymon et al. & Springer, 2002). This is one of the first instances of Mr. Krabs’ demonstrating how he has never had any qualms about cheating the system to avoid losing money. His greed only got increasingly worse with age. As an adult, he took a bankrupt retirement home and turned it into a restaurant, creating the very popular Krusty Krab (Drymon et al. & Springer, 2002). Krabs’ creation of this restaurant cemented him into a newfound position of power, opening the door for him to take advantage of employees for his benefit.

There are quite a few instances of Mr. Krabs showing how much he only cares about the profit from the labor of his employees and not the employees themselves. In one of the earlier episodes of the show, there is an instance where the fry cook, SpongeBob, has a breakdown and can no longer remember how to make Krabby Patties (Burns et al. & Lender, 1999). At first, this is of no concern to Mr. Krabs, that is until the replacement cook is causing the restaurant to lose business. Once Krabs sees that he is losing money because of the ordeal, he finally sees the value of his labor and goes to help his loyal employee. When Krabs goes to help SpongeBob he says, "All you need to do is get your confidence back, so you can make me more money...er, I mean, patties" (Burns et al. & Lender, 1999). At that moment, Krabs' Freudian slip revealed his true intentions for helping his dutiful employee; they were not to help him become the person he was before his breakdown but, instead, to help Krabs line his own pockets with more profit.

Another example of Krabs choosing money over the well-being of his workers happens when he decides to sell the restaurant. The episode entitled "Selling Out" starts with Mr. Krabs singing a song all about his love for money. His jaunty tune highlights his feeling about how there is "Nothing on Earth like the feeling of greed" (Cervas et al. & Waller, 2005). Almost serendipitously, after he finishes his song, Krabs' idol Howard Blandy, famous for buying out all of the family business in Bikini Bottom, enters the restaurant. Blandy approaches Krabs because he wants to buy out the Krusty Krab and turn it into a chain restaurant. Krabs jumps at the idea of selling when he sees how much money he will make, thus surrendering the restaurant and both of his employees. Squidward and SpongeBob are carelessly tossed aside and forced to

learn the new, corporate ways of the reimagined restaurant. The time Mr. Krabs spends away from the restaurant is very short-lived, and he returns to buy back the establishment he created. For a split second, it seemed as if Krabs actually cared about SpongeBob and Squidward, but unfortunately, Krabs made it clear at the end of the episode that he was just happy to have employees again (Cervas et al. & Waller, 2005). This episode makes it very evident that Krabs gets joy from having employees he can boss around and thrives off of being in control of the mode of production.

One of the most egregious instances where Krabs shows the lengths to which he is willing to abuse his employees occurs when he finds a new business opportunity for the Krusty Krab. Mr. Krabs realizes after a short vacation that he could make much more money if he entered the hospitality industry, so he turns the restaurant into a hotel and renames it Krusty Towers (Banks et al. & Waller, 2006). This episode is a clear example of Krabs abusing his role as SpongeBob and Squidward's boss. He essentially throws them into new jobs with no training, just so he can make more money. The only "training" he gives the two of them is a mantra he learned from the hotel he stayed at: "We shall never deny a guest, even the most ridiculous request" (Banks et al. & Waller, 2006). It does not take long for the hotel to become an overwhelming business and the whole building ends up collapsing. The episode ends with all three of them hospitalized and Krabs realizes that SpongeBob and Squidward should go to medical school. After viewing his astronomical hospital bill, he believes that all of the money is in the medical industry and that should be their next business venture. Even after the traumatic experience of transforming his business into a hotel and getting serious bodily injuries,

Krabs still only cares about money and new ways in which he can manipulate his employees for monetary gain.

Perhaps, one of the cruelest decisions Mr. Krabs made and very fitting of that of the Bourgeoisie was changing the hours of the Krusty Krab. In the episode “Fear of Krabby Patty,” Mr. Krabs notices that his competitor, Plankton, has changed his restaurant, The Chum Bucket, to be open twenty-three hours a day (Greenblatt et al. & Waller, 2005). Mr. Krabs, who lives for competition, decides that he will change the hours of his restaurant just so he can keep up with his competitor, but it is at the expense of his employees’ sanity. Krabs’ selfish choice impacts Squidward early on and he quickly becomes overworked. It is not until day forty-three of non-stop work that SpongeBob finally snaps from exhaustion. Instead of helping out his loyal employee, who is on the brink of a meltdown, he tells him “I’m sure it’s nothing getting back to work won’t solve” (Greenblatt et al. & Waller, 2005). The episode concludes with Krabs finally realizing that twenty-four-hour shifts are too long for his employees to handle and it is hurting his business. Instead, he tells them “Twenty-three hours will be plenty” (Greenblatt et al. & Waller, 2005). After seeing first-hand how his abusive treatment affected his employees, Krabs still wanted to have his employees deal with horrible working conditions in order to get as much money as possible and keep his competition at bay. Through the lens of Marxism, it is evident that Eugene Krabs is the exemplary face of the Bourgeoisie in the capitalist society of Bikini Bottom. Mr. Krabs thrives off the fact that he controls the means of production and can take advantage of his employees for monetary gain.

The titular character of *SpongeBob SquarePants* fits very uniquely within the Marxist analysis. He is also a member of the Proletariat, but unlike Squidward, he rarely challenges Mr. Krabs. SpongeBob adores his role at the Krusty Krab and is a very naïve creature in general, making him the perfect employee for Mr. Krabs to alienate and exploit. Krabs sees the potential value in SpongeBob's labor very early on in the show. In the pilot episode, "Help Wanted," SpongeBob applies for his dream job: the fry-cook at the Krusty Krab (Drymon et al. & Hillenburg, 1999). He tells Mr. Krabs that he has been training his whole life to become part of the Krusty crew, but Krabs makes a mockery of his enthusiasm. Instead of taking SpongeBob seriously, Krabs sends him on a mission to complete a ludicrous task to prove he is worthy of the job. While he is running his nearly impossible errand, the restaurant is bombarded with hundreds of customers. Krabs and Squidward are horrified as the establishment is flooded with angry customers, that is, until SpongeBob returns and saves the day. SpongeBob proves himself to Mr. Krabs by rapidly serving all of the customers by himself. At that moment, Krabs understood the importance of the labor that SpongeBob could bring to his business and how without him the restaurant would have crumbled.

As it was stated previously, SpongeBob rarely stands up to Mr. Krabs, and willingly lives his life as a cog in the capitalism-driven machine that is the Krusty Krab. Unlike his cashier coworker, SpongeBob thrives at work. SpongeBob truly shows how loyal he is later on in the series. In season nine of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, Mr. Krabs decides to assess how the restaurant's money is being spent (Brookshier et al. & Waller, 2013). After some calculations, Krabs realizes that he can save some money, one nickel to be exact if he cuts SpongeBob's salary entirely. SpongeBob is gutted by

this news. He even offers to work at the Krusty Krab for free if it means he can keep his job. Sadly, Krabs declines, saying that if he allowed him to work for free, he would lose his vendor's license. His parting words to his heartbroken employee were "You know I love you, son, but you can't argue with a nickel" (Brookshier et al. & Waller, 2013). This episode showcases not only how dispensable Krabs believes his employees are, but also how conditioned SpongeBob is within the society of Bikini Bottom. After being fired, he looks tirelessly for a new job and bounces around many restaurants, but none of them make him happy quite like the Krusty Krab. The episode concludes with Squidward kidnapping SpongeBob because Mr. Krabs realized how important he was to the success of his establishment and he figures out a way to make money to supplement what he is losing by paying SpongeBob for his work. After returning, SpongeBob says, "Now my life has purpose again" and joyously returns to his life as a fry-cook.

SpongeBob's unhealthy attachment to his job at the Krusty Krab can be rooted back in the fact that Krabs has successfully appropriated and alienated SpongeBob. An example of appropriation in the Marxist sense would be a person only seeing jewels for the monetary value and not admiring them more their intrinsic beauty (Ollman, 1972, p. 90). Krabs performs appropriation on SpongeBob by only seeing him for the labor he brings to the Krusty Krab and not the kind person he is. Krabs lives by Marx's idea that in capitalism man has no human needs and the only true need is money (Ollman, 1972, p. 92). This appropriation makes Mr. Krabs successful in alienating SpongeBob as an employee.

As it was mentioned earlier, alienation is the construct in which Marx displays the unfortunate effects capitalist production has on workers' physical and mental states, with the proletariat being the most affected (Ollman, 1972, pp. 131-132). Krabs has taken advantage of SpongeBob's naivety and furthered his preposterous idea that he needs to work at the Krusty Krab in order to function. Marx describes an alienated worker as a person who "has been reduced to performing undifferentiated work on humanly indistinguishable objects among people deprived of their human variety and compassion" (Ollman, 1972, p. 134). It is evident that SpongeBob embodies an alienated worker because he performs monotonous tasks, for very little money, while his heartless employer profits off of his exploitation.

### **Class Representation**

The creators of *SpongeBob SquarePants* did a great job showing class through the writing and the visuals in the television show. One of the main examples of this is the character Squilliam Fancyson. Squilliam is the sworn enemy of Squidward. Their ongoing conflict stems from the fact that they grew up together and Squilliam became very wealthy and successful while Squidward did not. Squidward envies Squilliam's success and constantly longs for a lifestyle just as lavish and even goes out of his way multiple times to convince Squilliam he is rich.

Squilliam is introduced early on in the series. He first appears in the second season in the episode "Band Geeks" (Greenblatt et al. & Springer, 2001). It is signaled that Squilliam is high class based on the fancy clothing he wears and the way he carries himself around those who are less wealthy. One of the first interactions he has with Squidward includes him mocking Squidward for working in the service industry. This

moment also demonstrates the immense pressure Squidward feels to fit in with his rich enemy. After Squilliam mocks him, he fabricates a story about how he has a very successful band just to try to impress him. Squilliam takes the bait and tells Squidward he cannot wait to see them play, thus forcing Squidward to assemble a group of musicians to play a concert. This task is incredibly stressful for Squidward and when it appears to be falling apart, he tells the band members that forming the band was his one chance of happiness. That instance is very disheartening but also a great example of how much Squidward associates being seen as equal in the eyes of the upper-class as the key to being happy. Thankfully, it all comes together and Squilliam is shocked. He is so floored by the fact that lowly Squidward was able to pull off that he had to be carried away on a stretcher. When looked at through a Neo-Marxist lens, that episode truly highlights what the upper-class citizen truly thinks of lower-class citizens and the societal pressure that the non-elites face.

Another instance of class being shown occurs when Squilliam returns in the following season. This time, he is seen bragging to a posse of followers about his private island and yacht (Drymon et al. & Lender, 2002). This moment gives a clearer idea of just how wealthy he is compared to his rival, Squidward. The two share another tense interaction where Squilliam teases Squidward for being a cashier. Similar to how Squidward handled their previous confrontation, he lies in an attempt to seem more successful. Squidward tells Squilliam that he owns and runs a five-star restaurant and much like his scheme with the marching band, he has to rapidly create the restaurant.

Squidward goes to great lengths to craft this charade. He recruits SpongeBob, Mr. Krabs, and his neighbor Patrick to revamp the Krusty Krab, making it

unrecognizable. Squidward is so ashamed of his real wealth status that he orchestrates an entire fake event just to impress somebody he does not even like. Naturally, the evening goes awry, and it is revealed to Squilliam that Squidward is working-class like he suspected. In the final moments of the episode, it seems like Squilliam might actually show some sympathy for Squidward by claiming he is also a cashier, but he did so just to have one last laugh at Squidward calling himself “filthy stinking rich” (Drymon et al. & Lender, 2002). Squidward hangs his head in shame and then faces the harsh reality that he is not as successful as his enemy. Fortunately for Squidward, that is not the final, wealth-based battle the two of them have.

A couple of seasons later, Squilliam makes another appearance. Squidward decides to unwind by watching the show *House Fancy* and is interrupted by a phone call from his high school rival, Squilliam (Iversen et al. & Waller, 2008). After a bit of back and forth between the two, the call ends with Squidward realizing that Squilliam is the featured guest on *House Fancy*, and he is calling him during the live taping. This leaves Squidward shocked and upset that his rival will get to flaunt his wealth on live television. This is the moment in *SpongeBob* where Squilliam’s wealth is most evidently showcased. Squilliam greets the viewers by saying “Hello, peasants” just before beginning the grand tour of his house with the host Nicholas Withers (Iversen et al. & Waller, 2008). Squilliam’s house is the definition of extravagant. His house is adorned with paintings of himself, an elevator doubling as a whirlpool bath, jewel-encrusted toilet paper holders and even a one hundred thirty-foot-long sculpture of his unibrow made entirely of gilded doorknobs (Iversen et al. & Waller, 2008). This presentation of Squilliam’s wealth infuriates Squidward and he takes it as a challenge.

Squidward calls into the show claiming his house is fancier and demands that it also be showcased. The host agrees, giving Squidward only two hours to transform his lackluster house. Naturally, SpongeBob comes to Squidward's aid, but he proves to do more harm than good. SpongeBob's actions effectively destroy Squidward's home, leaving it in piles of rubble. Luckily for Squidward, the host of *House Fancy* interprets the wreckage as modern architecture instead of ruins. He is so impressed with the newfound design that he dubs Squidward "House Fancy Prince of the Year" instead of Squilliam. This reversal of fortune leaves Squilliam in shambles, causing him to bawl his eyes out. Squilliam could not handle the fact that his working-class rival was being perceived as wealthy and deserving of the spotlight. With the lens of Neo-Marxism Squidward and Squilliam are a great representation of the feuding classes within a capitalist society, and how those within the upper-class long to maintain power.

## Chapter 4 Marxist Ideas and Other Media

### Ed, Edd n Eddy

*SpongeBob SquarePants* is not the only children's show that carries a latent message when applying the lens of Marxism. The shows yet to be discussed present Marxist latent messages in different ways than that of *SpongeBob*. While they may be more subtle and the analysis is not as deep as that of *SpongeBob*, they are still very effective when analyzed with Neo-Marxist theory. The analysis of the following programs demonstrates how Neo-Marxist messages are not exclusive to one cartoon.

The children's program *Ed, Edd n Eddy* sends a message about taking advantage of others for monetary gain (Antonucci, 1998-2008). The show follows three young boys whose sole goal is to create elaborate scams and take advantage of their friends for money so they can buy candy. The leader of the group, Eddy is the greediest out of the bunch. Throughout the show, he constantly fantasizes about getting rich and makes it seem as if it is all he cares about. At one point in the series, he even takes a Rorschach test and only sees "money" and "cash" (Antonucci et al., 1999). On the surface, this seems like a foolish show about kids just being kids, but when analyzed with a Marxist lens, this behavior sends a prominent message about an obsession with money and valuing it over the wellbeing of others.

The scams performed throughout the show range from fairly harmless to downright revolting. One of the more complex scams happened near the end of the first season. In the episode "Look into my Eds," the boys figure out how to perform hypnosis (Antonucci et al., 1999). One thing leads to another and they end up hypnotizing all of their friends and get them to hand over money. While it is an interesting premise, it is a

very unfortunate message to have in a children's show. This episode teaches audiences that it is okay to manipulate their friends for money as long as it is harmless.

Perhaps the most disgusting way they swindled their peers occurred in the episode "A Glass of Warm Ed" (Antonucci et al., 1999). In this episode, Edd and Eddy find out that Ed is a sleepwalker who likes to raid the fridges of all of the people who live in their cul-de-sac during his nightly walks. All of the people of the cul-de-sac wake up, realize all of their food is gone, and begin to complain about being hungry. Eddy sees this as a business opportunity. Unbeknownst to his neighbors, he has Ed regurgitate the food he ate while sleepwalking and he sells it back to them (Antonucci et al., 1999). This scheme is not only disgusting but also sends the message that it is okay to do vile things to your friends for money as long as you do not get caught. When looked at through the lens of Neo-Marxism *Ed, Edd n Eddy* is an example of a children's show that focuses on the obsession of monetary gain and the lengths one is willing to go to get profit.

### **The Fairly OddParents**

The second show, which sends a different message, is *The Fairly OddParents* (Hartman & Seibert, 2001-2017). The show follows the life of a young boy named Timmy Turner in the city of Dimmsdale who happens to have fairy godparents that grant him almost any wish he wants. Timmy has two best friends by the names of Chester and A.J. The kids in this show go about their lives like any other young child, but applying the lens of Marxism, allows viewers to focus on how different their upbringings are based on their class representation. All three of these characters fall in different levels within the class system with Timmy's household being middle-class, Chester's

being lower and A.J.'s being upper. Their class is demonstrated through their parents' careers and their living situations.

As it was stated previously, Timmy Turner represents middle-class life within *The Fairly OddParents* universe. This is shown mainly through the average-sized house he lives in and through his father. Timmy's mother has held jobs, but Mr. Turner is more so depicted as the breadwinner of the family. On career day at Timmy's school, Mr. Turner tells the kids "I'm what you might call a pencil pusher" (Fellows & Conrad, 2003). While his job might not be the most monetarily fruitful, it still allows the family to live in a nice house in an average neighborhood. It could be argued that Mr. Turner is reflective of the average member of the working class. Like most middle-class citizens, Mr. Turner knows that he may not have the best job, but he is still content. He tells Timmy, "I might not have a cool job like the other parents, but at least I'm always here to say goodnight" (Fellows & Conrad, 2003). Timmy's father is a good representation of the average citizen making just enough to provide for their family, but still longing to have more money.

Timmy's friend, A.J., lives a more lavish lifestyle than that of the Turner family. A.J. comes from an incredibly wealthy family. Much like Timmy, a lot of information regarding the source of their wealth comes from his father. A.J.'s father's career is unknown but based on the technology within his home, it is assumed that he is in the scientific field. A.J. resides in a massive home equipped with a plethora of gadgets, and even has the ability to teleport guests into his house (Nicholls et al. & Conrad, 2004; Thomas & Conrad, 2004). There is one moment in the show where the rich family even uses their advanced technology against A.J.'s friend Chester. Chester walks up to A.J.'s

door and is greeted by a giant laser that is meant to ward off girl scouts. The security system realizes its mistake and then triggers an even bigger laser designed specifically to get rid of Chester (Hartman et al. & Alcala et al., 2003). While that moment is very humorous, when analyzed from a Marxist perspective it is a demonstration of how A.J.'s parents look down on Chester due to his low financial status. After A.J. pushes Chester away from the laser's blast, he explains that his parents installed it. Chester is surprised and says, "But your parents love me!" and A.J. goes silent (Hartman et al. & Alcala et al., 2003). His speechlessness shows that his parents actually do not like Chester, and they do not want him around their son. A.J.'s family is exemplary of what it is like to be an incredibly wealthy family in Dimmsdale and how the upper-class feels about the lower-class.

The last of the main children on *The Fairly OddParents* is the aforementioned, Chester. Chester's household is a good example of what a low-income family looks like in Dimmsdale. Chester's class status stems from his father, Bucky McBadbat. Bucky is a failed baseball player, who is now unemployed and shunned from society (Hartman et al. & Fountain et al., 2002). Bucky is not always shown in the best of ways on the show. He is often depicted as either sitting on the toilet or walking around in his underwear and house slippers (Hartman et al. & Fountain et al., 2002). Due to his lack of income, Chester and his father have to live in a trailer park with fairly bleak conditions. The Happy Trails Trailer Park is located directly across from A.J.'s mansion separated by a set of train tracks (Fellows et al. & Bruce et al., 2003). That separation is significant when analyzed because it alludes to the old phrase that somebody lives "on the wrong side of the tracks," that somebody being Chester. Chester's living conditions in his

trailer are drastically different than his friend's. His trailer has no real furniture, he washes paper plates for reuse as a chore, and he regularly has to remove rodents from his living room (Hartman et al. & Alcala et al., 2003). The bleakest thing about Chester's life is what he and his father have to resort to in order to eat. There is an instance in the show where Timmy gets to switch places with Chester and see what it is like to have Bucky for a father. Timmy realizes that this was a poor choice when Bucky reveals that they will be stealing their dinner from the local zoo, specifically meerkats because they are a "nutritious and fat-free part of any balanced breakfast" (Nicholls et al. & Conrad, 2004). While the program does take Chester's poor financial situation and put a comedic and rather problematic spin on it, it is still one of the few children's programs that depicts how some lower-income individuals live their lives.

Applying the lens of Marxism to *The Fairly OddParents* is important because the class representation is a mere blip in the actual plot of the show. Unlike *SpongeBob* and *Ed, Edd n Eddy* where labor and money can be tied back to the arcs of the series, the same cannot be said for the overarching story of *The Fairly OddParents*. By using the lens of Neo-Marxism, *The Fairly OddParents* can be looked at in an entirely new perspective that demonstrates how these characters grow up together yet live very different lives and have unique struggles.

### **The Smurfs**

Unlike the aforementioned programs, *The Smurfs* shows a different societal structure when analyzed through the lens of Neo-Marxism (Barbera & Hanna, 1981-1989). When viewed from the perspective of Marxism, *The Smurfs* represents what an ideal society with communist roots should look like. Within the world of *The Smurfs*, they

do not have an obsession with money, and everyone contributes their fair share solely because they care about one another. Their society closely reflects that of socialism, which grew from the roots of communism (History, 2019). This collaboration within their world has made it so they successfully keep workers from being appropriated and alienated, unlike *SpongeBob*.

Their society has also eliminated the need for capital, which is crucial in a society under the structure of capitalism. As it was mentioned previously, capital is described as the kind of property that exploits wage-labor and the only way there can no longer be wage-labor is if there is no capital (Ollman, 1972, pp. 13-14). By eliminating the need for capital, in this case, money, the Smurfs do not need wage-labor to function as a society. Consequently, the elimination of wage-labor in the world of *The Smurfs* also grants them the opposite of alienation: unification. According to Marx, the unification process is at work when there is a solid division of labor resulting in the erasure of social classes (Ollman, 1972, p. 135). The community within *The Smurfs* operates very collaboratively, ensuring that everyone is treated as equals, greatly contrasting the other programs whose societies are entrenched in capitalism and the greed that unfortunately comes along with it.

The main villain within *The Smurfs* is named Gargamel. He is an evil sorcerer who relentlessly tries to bring havoc to the Smurfs' community and disrupt their peaceful society. When the lens of Neo-Marxism is applied, Gargamel can also be seen as a symbol of capitalism. In the show, Gargamel's motives are inherently selfish, much like those who control the means of production in a capitalist society. This program is representative of how while society can be very successful under the structure of

communism, there will still be those who want to bring forth oppression for their personal gain.

## Chapter 5 Conclusion

This research has proven that children's media has the power to send complex latent messages. Whether a program is from the 1980s or the 2000s, it can carry a powerful message, especially when examined through the lens of Neo-Marxism. One large discovery that arose from the research for this project was the realization of how poorly those in poverty are represented in the media. This is evident with Chester's class disparity in *The Fairly OddParents* and is demonstrative of how the media portrays those who are lower-class. Scholar Dr. Diana Kendall says that the ways in which class is portrayed in the media can have a major impact on how viewers feel about class as well as inequality (Kendall, 2011, p. 2). While this program may be fictional and comedic, it is not unfair to say that the way Chester and his father are written is ultimately damaging. Kendall states,

“Although some may argue that how class is depicted in the media does not matter because each of us can use our own experiences to balance any inaccurate portrayal that we see on television or read in the newspaper or magazine, this contention is not realistic; it assumes that we can distinguish between the realities of the U.S. class structure as it actually exists and the fictionalized version of a perceived reality of class as it is depicted by the mass media” (Kendall, 2011, pp. 4-5)

That information is important to keep in mind considering that, in this case, the target audience of *The Fairly OddParents* is very young and impressionable. The media is guilty of being full of positive portrayals of wealthy people that invoke the feeling that they are deserving of their wealth while at the same time showing negative imagery of

lower-class people making it seem as if they deserve to be in their situation (Kendall, 2011, p. 10). This trope is evident in *The Fairly OddParents* with A.J.'s father being very busy and clean-cut while Chester's dad is lazy and poorly dressed. One of the key ideas to understand is that there is a very fine line between a sympathetic portrayal of those in poverty and a portrayal that harbors judgment and perpetuates stereotypes (Kendall, 2011, p. 121). The findings from this research make it clear that creators need to reevaluate how they are portraying fictional characters in poverty because their exaggerated portrayals could be influencing people's attitudes about real impoverished peoples causing them to ignore the systemic issues that contribute to poverty.

While this analysis proved to be full of useful and intriguing information, it was not without its challenges. One of the biggest challenges was narrowing the focus of the analysis for *SpongeBob SquarePants*. In the beginning, it was assumed that this process was going to be rather easy because the primary show, *SpongeBob*, seemed as if it would lend itself to giving a large amount of information. That proved to be false. At first, it seemed as if the titular character, SpongeBob, would be the focus of the analysis, but that turned out to be the opposite. The focus of the discussion narrowed on his coworker, Squidward. Unlike SpongeBob, Squidward fits far better into the role of the struggling member of the working class and his struggles are a lot more evident than his porous friend.

Another challenge that presented itself in the research process was finding other examples of children's cartoons that would fit well into the Marxist analysis. There are many existing programs that could be looked at from a Marxist perspective, but it was difficult to select shows that had not already been the subject of stringent analysis. The

programs that ended up being chosen were picked because they all carried unique messages, that differed from those in *SpongeBob*. It was important to show that Marxist analysis does not require that the main storyline follow that of an overworked employee; it can be used to pick out more subtle messages as well.

This thesis only scratched the surface when it comes to Marxist analysis. If one were to continue adding information to this area, there are a few recommendations that can be made. One could continue to explore more cartoons or even live-action children's programming. This paper primarily focused on cartoons from the late '90s and 2000s, and this area of study would greatly benefit from expanding the research to programs from other decades. Since Neo-Marxist theory is the more contemporary form of analysis, it would be interesting to look back at older programs that might not have been analyzed simply because they were difficult to study with the traditional Marxist theory.

Another route a researcher could take is dissecting children's media from other cultures. It would be interesting to see how the messages differ in places with different political ideologies. A lot of the messages in this analysis that come off negative are tailored for the American audience and are often used for humor's sake, not meant to be taken literally. It would be fascinating to see the messages that another country's children's cartoons have, especially from those that have or do live under a communist system.

A future researcher could also take their project a step further and test this theory on a group of young people. They could possibly do this by having them view the cartoons and then get their honest opinions about how certain characters are treated in

their fictional societies and how they personally feel about money. This would be a way to see if the theory that young audiences are truly affected by the present latent messages.

All in all, this research project was successful in showing how children's media has the power to convey complex latent messages, especially when analyzed with the lens of Marxist theory. Through the lens of Neo-Marxism, *SpongeBob SquarePants* clearly demonstrates the differences in social classes as well as the struggles of those working within a capitalist system. This research has also demonstrated that Marxist theory can be applied to other programs that convey their own unique messages. Hopefully, this research will cause others to pursue different avenues and tackle the issues of how the working class and those in poverty are presented in the media to young audiences.

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