

The Simpsons and Democracy Political Apathy, Popular Culture, and Lifelong Learning as Satire

Paul Armstrong
University of Leeds, United Kingdom

Abstract: In the lead up to the recent presidential election in the USA and the imminent general election in the UK, there has been much discussion around the ‘problem of political apathy’. This paper attempts to analyse the meaning of this in both countries, and consider the sources of people’s political socialisation and development of political literacy, including popular culture.

Purpose

In an episode of *The Simpsons* entitled "Two Cars in Every Garage, Three Eyes on Every Fish," the Simpson family ruins Monty Burns's shot at becoming governor. As Mr. Burns leaves the Simpson home he turns to his majordomo and says, "Ironic, isn't it Smithers? This anonymous clan of slack-jawed troglodytes has cost me the election. And yet, if I were to have them killed, *I* would be the one to go to jail! That's democracy for you."¹

In contemporary UK and the USA there is a significant and increasing degree of disquiet with the current construction of democracy. Whilst writing this paper, the House of Lords in the UK has spent 36 hours concluding the debate about new anti-terrorism legislation being ‘rushed through’ Parliament by the Labour Government, against opposition from the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties and, indeed, a significant proportion of the Labour Government itself. How can we make sense of the claim that in order to protect democracy it is necessary to put in place anti-democratic legislation that undermines the general principles of human rights and civil liberties?

My task in this paper is *not* to address this specific instance, for it is one of many challenges to democracy that have been experienced in the USA and the UK over recent decades that require us to ask questions about our images of democracy. From a lifelong learning perspective, this paper is more concerned to analyse the sources of our construction of political processes and philosophies, and the argument is that the answer is to be found not in our educational institutions, but in popular culture. Given the brevity of this paper it can only focus on a narrow area of popular culture, specifically that area that utilises political satire in order to raise issues and stimulate critical reflection on the state of our nations’ politics. The paper will not argue that political satire is any more or less significant than other aspects of media that seeks to educate us about politics, including the news media; indeed, the argument would want to say that it is the infiltration of everyday life in political critique that leads us to question the nature of democracy, although – granted – formal education may help develop our intellectual capacities for making sense of complex and contradictory ideologies.

What did you learn in school today?

I learned that Washington never told a lie.
I learned that soldiers seldom die.
I learned that everybody's free.
And that's what the teacher said to me.
That's what I learned in school today.

I learned our government must be strong.
It's always right and never wrong.

Our leaders are the finest men.
And we elect them again and again.

I learned that war is not so bad.
I learned of the great ones we have had.
We fought in Germany and in France.
And some day I might get my chance.
(Tom Paxton © Cherry Lane Music)

In the UK, between 1988 and 1997, one probably did not learn these things at school. The introduction of a very overcrowded National Curriculum specifying in detail what had to be taught left little space for political literacy. According to Kerr (2003)² citizenship had never been far from the top of governments' education agenda, and was introduced into the National Curriculum. Following the publication of the report by the *Advisory Committee on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools* (Crick, 1998)³, a non-statutory framework for citizenship and personal, social and health education (PSHE) was introduced into English schools in 2000. Citizenship education then quickly became a statutory national curriculum subject in secondary schools from September 2002. The government had realised the 'importance of citizenship and democracy':

"Citizenship provides learning opportunities for pupils, from the Foundation Stage, through Key Stages 1 to 4 and for students in the post-16 sector, to gain the knowledge, skills and understanding necessary to play an effective role in society at local, national and international levels. It:

- helps them to become informed, thoughtful and responsible citizens who are aware of their duties and rights.
- promotes spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, making them more self-confident and responsible both in and beyond the classroom.
- encourages pupils to play a helpful part in the life of their schools, neighbourhoods, communities and the wider world.
- teaches them about our economy and democratic institutions and values; encourages respect for different national, religious and ethnic identities; and develops pupils' ability to reflect on issues and take part in discussions." ⁴

After a decade without such learning, why was it now such a matter of concern? Answer: 'political apathy'. After nearly twenty years of Conservative rule, there had been a growing awareness of a high degree of consensus among the mainstream political groups, an awareness that was heightened after New Labour came to power in 1997, and to a large extent, particularly through its education policies, merely continued the work of the previous administration. From an individual perspective, the expressed feeling was that one vote – *my* vote – made not a lot of difference anymore, for it was neither likely to influence the election result, nor government policies. As a consequence,

increasing proportions of the population *made the decision* not to vote. The trend was more obvious in local and European elections and in national by-elections, but even national General Elections were showing an increasing proportion of non-voters. How is this accounted for? A large range of reasons have been identified but they are generally clustered under the heading of ‘political apathy’. This phrase is interesting because it implies disinterest, and the groups most disinterested are young, working-class, from ethnic minority and low income families (the groups most likely in the UK to be labelled as ‘disaffected’ and in need of social inclusion). As young adults there is not a significant gender difference, but as they get older, men are more likely to vote than women, which might be reflection of their changing occupational status (one does not worry about voting for or against a Party putting up income tax if one has no income to be taxed). And it is the young adults that appear to be of most concern. Since the 1970 election, 18 year olds have been able to vote, but the election statistics show that they have never voted in significant numbers.

Is the answer to this perceived ‘political apathy’, then, due to the failure of schools and colleges to develop political literacy? Here I want to argue against this idea, though on the surface it would be a convenient excuse to blame successive governments for a decline in active participation in the democratic process. A key reason for this is that just because subjects are included in the curriculum does not make them inevitably equally interesting to all students. Indeed, the research evidence suggests that when there is no, or limited, choice in the curriculum students are more likely to be disinterested in the subject. If citizenship and democracy had been a compulsory subject, as it has now become in UK schools, then probably the same ‘disaffected’ groups would have chosen to disengage. The imposition of citizenship and democracy into the curriculum of schools and colleges as a *subject* will do little to address the perceived apathy. Indeed, the vague, contentless lessons in ‘citizenship’ now made compulsory in schools seem designed more as lessons in morality and life-skills than political socialisation or – a preferred term – political literacy. It may be that by treating political literacy as less a subject and more a way of critically thinking or understanding social and cultural life – an essential part of socialisation - then may be that by focusing on active citizenship and political participation, rather than party politics and personalities then schools might be more successful in engaging young adults. At the heart of the problem in the UK, at least, is the poor perception of the current political system and politicians who appear regularly in the media. The indications are that the lack of participation perceived as apathy is a lifestyle choice reflecting the fact that party politics is no longer part of the fabric of everyday life, no more important than any other lifestyle choices such as fashion and popular cultural activities. The choice is not to consume politics.

Deconstructing Homer

As already indicated, political apathy is by no means a new phenomenon. Under the heading ‘a cloak of apathy’, Thomas⁵ (2004) explores political disengagement with popular politics through a study of the media between 1940 and 1945. There have been recurrent debates about the crisis of apathy in the period since then (for example, Brynin and Newton⁶, 2003). Immediately prior to the 2004 US presidential elections, the British population were invited by its leading weekly television guide, *The Radio Times*, to nominate their preferred fictional president. Homer Simpson topped the

vote. So what do we know about Homer Simpson's politics? Is he a democrat or a republican? The answer is not easy to detect, and one suspects the writers of *The Simpsons* intentionally want to keep this ambiguous, so as not to disengage half the families in the USA. For example, it is not difficult to find expressions of racism and sexism in Homer's discourse, though to challenge the stereotype, we have seen his favourable attitudes towards gay communities⁷. He and his family are regular church-goers, but at the same time is the epitome of a 'hagiophobic' man, constantly trying to avoid going to church, and certainly not as committed⁸ to deeply-held religious beliefs as his neighbour, Ned Flanders, who some have argued was responsible for the re-election of George W. Bush⁹. Homer is union member in his place of work, and indeed in one episode is portrayed as president of the union. On the other hand, he has expressed anti-union sentiments throughout the seasons. Homer expresses his views to Lisa, his daughter: 'If you don't like your job, you don't strike. You just go in everyday and do it really half-assed – that's the American way'. On the other hand, he does not like the former president, George Bush Snr, having got into conflict with him after he gave Bart, Homer's son, a spanking when he moved into Homer's Springfield neighbourhood, to write his memoirs.

To date, there are references to George Bush Snr in 16 episodes, including one first aired in January 1992 which includes the Simpson family watching a clip of Bush's State of the Union address in which Bush urged American families to be 'more like the Waltons and less like the Simpsons', to which Bart later responds 'Hey, we are like the Waltons – we're praying for the end of the Depression too'. In total, 33 presidents of the United States have had references or allusions, from George Washington to George W. Bush¹⁰. Abraham Lincoln is referred or is alluded to in 45 episodes, Kennedy in 39 and Clinton 33. All living ex-Presidents have been invited to participate as a guest in the series; none have accepted. On the other hand, UK Prime Minister Tony Blair did accept the invitation, and was there to welcome the Simpson family when they arrived in London. In this episode¹¹, Homer drives into Buckingham Palace and collides with the Queen's carriage, and ends up in the Tower of London, but is eventually pardoned by HM Queen Elizabeth II (who does not appear as a guest) providing he agreed to take Madonna back to the USA with him.

It is this ambivalence on meaning and significance that makes *The Simpsons* so successful, since it requires the viewer to engage with the images, text and soundtrack in order to make meanings, to consider all possible interpretations and theories of meaning that are necessary for democratic consciousness.. The popularity of the series, now in its sixteenth season, and a global phenomenon, watched by both adults¹² and children, demonstrates its significance for political literacy.

There is little doubt that *The Simpsons* has a strong political edge to it. In some episodes it is obvious as the dominant theme¹³, but otherwise a deep and continuous reading of each of the 300-plus episodes is necessary, if only to determine how the scriptwriters are using satire, irony or parody – which is most of the time. The politics is sometimes party politics, but we never know whether the series is for and against either the Republicans or the Democrats. Because of its critical nature, it is certainly challenging the conservatism of the Republicans, but equally challenging of liberalism of the Democrats.

According to Gleeson (1998), *The Simpsons*

does not try and score political points. It targets hypocrisy, corruption and institutionalized laziness wherever it finds them, being cheerfully vicious to whoever the writers think deserves it. In one memorable episode, an elephant charges through first a Democratic Party convention, where the banners read "We're not fit to govern" and then a Republican one, where they say "We're just plain evil". The show has constantly tried to raise political awareness, in as gentle and non-hectoring way as possible. The early episode "Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington" was a classic example of the morality tale as popular entertainment, and they have explored through the nefarious dealings of Sideshow Bob the concepts, so beloved of the present establishment, of media manipulation and multi-million dollar campaign funding.¹⁴

To be critical of the establishment, including the alternative mainstream political perspective does position *The Simpsons* to the Left. Although the family is often described as dysfunctional, *The Simpsons'* political attitude does not emerge from 'adolescent paranoia or unthinking reactionism':

The show pummels the far-right and the 'moral majority' partly because it's such great fun to see their little faces screw up in baffled anger, but mostly because it is the most sensible and (in the best sense) the most obvious thing to do. Groening [executive producer] and co. believe wholeheartedly that Bush-bashing and NRA-baiting are activities that any right-headed, enlightened American both applauds and takes part in themselves. It is more an illustration of the make-up of the American media and culture in general that the show's unashamed possession of a political conscience is seen as so bizarre. Groening, once asked if his politics weren't left of centre, said, "I like to think of myself as middle of the road, but the rest of our culture would define me as loony left"¹⁵.

Political literacy through popular cultural and political satire

Homer: Oh, Marge, cartoons don't have any deep meaning. They're just stupid drawings that give you a cheap laugh. [gets up, revealing rear cleavage]¹⁶

This paper has argued that we need to take a cultural studies perspective on the perception of democracy and the nature of political apathy, using semiotic deconstruction of cultural media messages we might gain an understanding of how we come to form and accept particular cultural and political values in everyday life. The messages contained in popular culture need to be made explicit and debated. The significance of transmitters and receivers of messages is crucial for recognising the leaning that can take place through engagement in popular cultural activities. Rather than seeing this as presenting an alternative perspective to that gained through learning in formal educational settings, semiotic analyses should be informing adult educator as to both their responsibilities with respect to political literacy and strategies in the classroom.

We need to go a stage further and position the analysis in terms of its cultural functions. For all intents and purposes, the assumption here is that *The Simpsons* represents a specific genre. Whilst no one would doubt it is a cartoon, it is also a sit-com. The basis of the comedy is primarily satire,

which utilises both irony and parody to communicate its political messages. This suggests that our sophisticated viewer of *The Simpsons* needs not only to have already developed their political literacy, but they need to engage in media and cultural analyses, the absence of which may impose barriers to the reception of the political issues, and restrict the degree of engagement in the debate. This requires a more detailed analysis of political satire as critical pedagogy than can be provided here¹⁷.

References

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- ¹ ‘Two Cars in Every Garage, Three Eyes on Every Fish’ (Season Two, 1990, 7F01)
- ² David Kerr (2003) ‘Citizenship education in England: the making of a new subject’, *Online Journal of Social Science Education*, 2/2003; <http://www.sowi-onlinejournal.de/2003-2/index.html>
- ³ Bernard Crick (1998) *Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools: Final Report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship*. London: QCA <http://www.qca.org.uk/2923.html>.
- ⁴ Department for Education and Skills (2005) <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/citizenship/>
- ⁵ James Thomas (2004) ‘A cloak of apathy’: political disengagement, popular politics and the *Daily Mirror* 1940-1945’ *Journalism Studies*, 5, 4, pp. 469-482
- ⁶ Malcolm Brynain and Kenneth Newton (2003) ‘The national press and voter turnout: general elections of 1992 and 1997’ *Political Communication*, 20, 1, pp. 59-69
- ⁷ In ‘Homer’s Phobia’ (Season Eight, 1997, 4F11), Homer takes a liking for storeowner, John, until Marge informs him that John is gay, and refuses to see him, and then believes that John is having an influence over Bart. For a more positive image, see ‘Threes Gays of the Condo’ (Season Fourteen, 2003, EABF12). Throughout the series we are left to question the sexual identity of Smithers, Mr Burn’s personal assistant. Another paper would be required to analyse the portrayal of diversity and difference in *The Simpsons* – up to the end of Season Twelve, there had been 90 references to homosexuality alone, without counting the references to Smithers.
- ⁸ In ‘Homer the Heretic’ (Season Four, 1992, 9F01), Homer decides to stop attending church. There is an argument that *The Simpsons* are not just apolitical, but represent a religious satire, see Scott Satkin, ‘*The Simpsons* as religious satire’ <http://www.snpp.com/other/papers/ss.paper.html>; amore general perspective is given by Jeff Shalda ‘Religion in *The Simpsons*’ <http://www.snpp.com/other/papers/jsh.paper.html>
- ⁹ Romeo St Martin (2004), ‘Is Ned Flanders keeping George Bush in the White House?’ *Politics Watch*, November 5, 2004;
- ¹⁰ ‘Presidents on *The Simpsons*’ *The Simpsons Archive*. <http://www.snpp.com/guides/presidents.html>
- ¹¹ ‘The Regina Monologues’ (Season 14, 2003, EABF22)
- ¹² In the first season in ‘Krusty gets Busted’ (Season One, 1990, 7G12), Lisa says: ‘If cartoons were meant for adults, they’d put them on in prime time’.
- ¹³ For example, ‘Mr Lisa goes to Washington’ (Season Three, 1991, 8F01). ‘Sideshow Bob Roberts (Season Six, 1994, 2F02), ‘Two Bad Neighbours (Season Seven, 1996, 3F09), ‘The Trouble with Trillions’ (Season , 1998, 5F14), and ‘Mr Spritz goes to Washington’ (Season Fifteen, 2003, EABF09)
- ¹⁴ Jim Gleeson, (1998) ‘Yellow fever: *The Simpsons* as a Cultural Phenomenon’ *The College Tribune*, Dublin: University College Dublin November 11, 1998. <http://www.snpp.com/other/articles/yellowfever.html>
- ¹⁵ *ibid*
- ¹⁶ ‘Mr Lisa goes to Washington’ (Season Three, 1991, 8F01).
- ¹⁷ Paul Armstrong (2005) ‘Satire as critical pedagogy’ Paper delivered to ‘What a difference a pedagogy makes: researching lifelong learning and teaching’, *Third International Conference on Research in Lifelong Learning*, Stirling, 24-26 June 2005; for further academic analysis of *The Simpson* as political satire, see: John Albert (ed) (2004) *Leaving Springfield: The Simpsons and the Possibility of Oppositional Culture*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press; William Irwin et al. (eds) (2001) *The Simpsons and Philosophy*. London: BCA; Steven Keslowitz (2004) *The Simpsons and Society*. Tucson, Az: Hats Off Books ; Chris Turner (2004) *Planet Simpson*. London: Ebury Press;