



Article Info/Makale Bilgisi

✓Received/Geliş:29.11.2019 ✓Accepted/Kabul:27.05.2020

DOI: 10.30794/pausbed.652693

Araştırma Makalesi/ Research Article

Tan, C. (2020). "A Gramscian and Althusserian Critique of *The Simpsons*" *Pamukkale Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, sayı 40, Denizli, s. 125-135.

A GRAMSCIAN AND ALTHUSSERIAN CRITIQUE OF *THE SIMPSONS*

Cenk TAN*

Abstract

As the all-time longest running television cartoon, *The Simpsons* bears a great deal of political implications. Among these implications, class conflict in general and Gramscian and Althusserian stand out in particular. Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser are two intellectuals who have provided significant contributions to Marxist literary theory. This article examines the renowned, American television show, *The Simpsons* from the viewpoint of Gramscian and Althusserian thought. Thus, the study analyzes the famous cartoon from the perspective of class conflict and criticizes it through the window of Gramscian civil society and hegemony while at the same time scrutinizing the work of popular culture by referring to Althusser's notion of ideological and state apparatuses. Having analyzed these notions in *The Simpsons*, the article concludes by demonstrating how seriously incorporated *The Simpsons* actually is with Gramscian and Althusserian references and how these are embedded in the sub-layers of the television production. Finally, it also reveals that the happiness behind the parody is purely artificial and leaves many questions unanswered.

Keywords: *The Simpsons, Gramsci, Althusser, Civil Society, Hegemony, State Apparatuses, Springfield.*

GRAMSCI VE ALTHUSSERCİ BAKIŞ AÇISIYLA *SİMPSONLAR* ELEŞTİRİSİ

Özet

Tüm zamanların en uzun süre yayımlanan televizyon çizgi yapımı olan *The Simpsons*, kendi bünyesinde pek çok politik imalar içermektedir. Bunların arasında genel anlamda sınıf çatışması ve özel olarak ise Gramsci ve Althusser'in kavramları ön plana çıkmaktadır. Antonio Gramsci ve Louis Althusser, Marksist eleştiri kuramına önemli katkılarda bulunmuş olan entelektüellerdir. Bu makale, dünyaca ünlü Amerikan çizgi filmi, *The Simpsons*'u Gramsci ve Althusserci bakış açısıyla incelemektedir. Buna göre, çalışma, *The Simpsons* adlı popüler kültür yapımını, sınıfsal açıdan incelemekte ve Gramsci'nin sivil toplum ile hegemonya kavramlarını, Althusser'in devlet aygıtları kavramları ile bağdaştırarak eleştirmektedir. Böylece makale, *The Simpsons* çizgi filminde mevcut olan Gramsci ve Althusser kavramlarını açığa çıkarmakta ve tüm politik imaları açıklığa kavuşturarak bu yapımın sınıfsal imalar ile ne denli yüklü olduğunu ve tüm bunların yapımın alt katmanlarında nasıl yerleştirilmiş olduklarını gözler önüne sermektedir. Son olarak, *The Simpsons* parodisinin arka planında yer alan mutluluğun tamamen yapay olduğu ve beraberinde gelen çeşitli soruları cevapsız bıraktığı kanısı da açığa çıkarılmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *The Simpsons, Gramsci, Althusser, Sivil Toplum, Hegemonya, Devlet Aygıtları, Springfield.*

* Öğr. Gör. Dr. Pamukkale Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, DENİZLİ.
e-mail: ctan@pau.edu.tr (orcid.org/0000-0003-2451-3612)

INTRODUCTION

The Simpsons is the all-time longest running animated TV show in the history of television. From its very first episode in 1989 till our present day, many generations have been raised with *The Simpsons* which, after a period of over 30 years is still on air all throughout the world. The show is with no doubt one of the most well-known, intriguing and inquisitive TV productions ever released. *The Simpsons* is a unique work of popular culture and there are many qualities that make it so. It is not just fun, hilarious and interesting but at the same time sarcastic and ironical. What specific characteristics make *The Simpsons* so special? The series is an extensive criticism and deconstruction of the contemporary American society. It focuses on the lives of *The Simpsons*, a typical American working-class family. However, despite the fact that the series concentrates on *The Simpsons* family, there is a load of other characters that appear throughout the series. It is also worth noting that most of the characters in the animation series are stereotypical characters including *The Simpsons* family. *The Simpsons* is highly ideological and definitely worth close scrutiny.

This article strives to provide a comprehensive critique of *The Simpsons* by analyzing the show from a Marxist perspective in general and from a Gramscian and Althusserian point of view in particular. In addition, prominent characters are scrutinized with several references to specific episodes. Furthermore, concrete examples which are directly related to Gramscian and Althusserian notions are analyzed as well.

First and foremost, Marxist theory is with no doubt one of the most striking and influential doctrines in the history of humanity. Throughout the history, many countries and societies have been either directly or indirectly affected by this influential philosophy. After Marx and Engels, the founding fathers of the philosophy, lots of other inspiring intellectuals have contributed and further developed the fundamentals of Marxist theory. Hence, this study particularly concentrates on the works and notions of two prominent Marxist intellectuals: the Italian Antonio Gramsci and the French Louis Althusser.

ANTONIO GRAMSCI'S CIVIL SOCIETY AND HEGEMONY

Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci has made significant contributions to Marxist theory. He not only reformulated existing concepts but also set forth new and original notions concerning earlier Marxist thinkers.

One of the most substantial of his notions is the concept of civil society. Gramsci claimed that his notion of civil society is associated with the superstructure rather than the base (Mouffe, 1979: 30). In his famous Prison Notebooks, Gramsci argues that:

[...] what we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural 'levels': the one that can be called 'civil society', that is the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private', and that of 'political society' or 'the State'. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the function of 'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the State and 'juridical' government. (Gramsci, Hoare, and SMITH, 1971: 145)

According to Gramsci, the civil society and the state are two notions that constitute the superstructure. Together these two notions contribute to the forming of hegemony.

Civil society incorporates: "the whole of ideological-cultural relations and the whole of spiritual and intellectual life" (Mouffe, 1979: 30-31). What's more, civil society also includes the educational system, political parties, sports teams, the legal system, family, media and also children's parties and shopping trips. Therefore, the broadest definition is stated as: "The ensemble of organisms commonly called "private" and hence, civil society becomes a matter of individual values rather than a matter of organized cultural institutions" (Jones, 2007: 32). As a consequence, civil society is more into the private domain rather than the public or state controlled domain. Examples of civil society are to be found on various occasions in the society.

Nevertheless, Gramsci's notion of civil society is significantly different than Marx's definition of the concept. While Marx associated civil society with the material base, Gramsci affiliated it with the superstructure and ascribed a whole new meaning to the term. Hence, Gramsci as a political ideologist is regarded as an idealist mainly due to the fact that he categorized at the top what Marx had placed on the base (Coutinho, 2012: 78).

Another notion that was proposed by Gramsci is his renowned notion of "Hegemony". Taken and further developed from earlier Marxists, Gramsci states that: "the following historical and political criterion is the one on which research must be based: a class is dominant in two ways, that is to say it is dominant and ruling. It rules the allied classes and dominates the opposing classes" (Mouffe, 1979: 179). Gramsci hereby claims that any class can become dominant and exert power over the other one. Earlier Marxists generally used the term hegemony in an economic context whereas Gramsci uses it in a rather general context to imply superiority in power relations. Gramsci further describes hegemony as that moment when:

One becomes aware that one's own corporate interests, in their present and future development, transcend the corporate limits of the purely economic class, and can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too... Placing all the questions around which the struggle rages on a "universal", not a corporate level, thereby creating the hegemony of a fundamental social group over a series of subordinate ones. (1979: 180)

Thus, hegemony is all about power relations; which group dominates and which group subordinates the other group. Since power relations are central in human conduct and whereabouts, it is indispensable to take this into consideration. While Gramsci often plays with words, the aspect of hegemony has different connotations in specific areas. In conventional Marxism, it connotes the authority of a class over others whereas in international relations it connotes supremacy. As a result of Gramsci's contributions, the notion has also come to connote compliance and incorporate intellectual guidance (Sassoon, 2002: 45). However, Gramsci also formulated a way out for the oppressed working class and argued that:

The subordinate classes, he said, must acquire consciousness of their own existence and of their own strength. Yet they only succeed in doing this to the extent to which they manage to discern and to evaluate the existence and the strength of the dominant class. 'The lower classes, being historically on the defensive, can only become conscious of themselves by negations, through the awareness of the personality and the class limits of the enemy. But this very process is still in its infancy, at least on a national scale. (Pozzolini, 1970: 73)

The struggle of The Simpson family is equal to the struggle of the American working class and class awareness is yet at its primary stages. Homer and his family are the play toys of the American ruling classes. They maintain their existence unaware of the upper classes' whereabouts and schemes. Moreover, Fontana discusses that Gramsci's hegemony:

Implies the unity of philosophy and history, for "concrete action" and the "transformation of reality" (which are the object of politics) presuppose a social reality and a conception of the world that are anchored within "time and space." But whereas to Croce history is the history of philosophy (the ethico-political), to Gramsci history is the history of egemonia—that is, the history of the unity of philosophy and politics, thought and action. (Fontana, 1993: 21)

Gramsci openly relates history to the history of hegemony, in other words the history designed and written by the hegemonic classes. It is their history that becomes the commonly acknowledged reality. Thus, it can be asserted that hegemonic classes transform reality which the subordinate, lower classes take for granted. For *The Simpsons* family, the reality they are exposed to is largely dominated and administered by the hegemonic powers of America and Springfield. The town's local authorities (governor, mayor, the police department etc.) and Springfield's almighty, opulent capital holder, Mr. Burns (Nuclear Power Plant owner) constitute the hegemonic powers that create and transform the reality for their own interests.

The Gramscian notion of Civil Society is clearly observable in *The Simpsons*. First and foremost, the Springfield Elementary school where Bart and Lisa Simpson are enrolled is a foremost example of Civil Society. The school itself embodies cultural and ideological values and is therefore a concrete example of Civil Society. The school is like a microscopic society and reflects all forms of values the society possesses. Principal Skinner is an overanxious, disturbed single man who lives with his mother and is controlled by her all the time. The teachers are far from being qualified and are heavy smokers who also suffer from drinking problems. Groundskeeper Willie is an isolated figure that takes care of the school's hard labour and Otto is the extravagant school bus driver who is more into rock music than driving buses. Besides all these, there are of course the students with their bullies (Nelson) and nerds (Lisa, Milhouse etc.) The bullies not only bully the weaker children but from time to time also bully principal Skinner for fun to which he does not manage to respond or resist in a proper manner.

The school as a form of Civil Society perfectly reflects how much priority is given to education by the capitalist system. The teachers are underpaid, the school has serious funding problems, students can't get high-quality education but these are no vital issues for those who maintain the continuance of this order. It is also very hard to tell who is exactly in charge at school. At first glance, it seems that Principal Skinner is in charge but the reality is truly something else. Skinner is just a subordinate, formalistic bureaucrat who is always present in his tidy, shiny suit. Springfield Elementary in general embodies absurdist qualities as there is constant anarchy at school. This anarchy and disorder manifests itself in a great many episodes. In season 6, episode 8 principal Skinner makes the following school announcement:

Attention, students, this is Principal Skinner, your principal, with a message from the principal's office. Report immediately for an assembly in the Butthead Memorial Auditorium. Damn it, I wish we hadn't let the students name that one. ("Lisa on ice," 1994)

The anarchic nature of Springfield Elementary is quite obvious here as even Skinner as the principal can accidentally make fun of himself in front of the children. Despite his seriousness and formal manners, Skinner is quite often the victim of his own absurd existence and always becomes a play toy of the children he is supposed to lead.

Another instance of Civil Society is the Episcopal church of Springfield. Administered by Reverend Timothy Lovejoy, the protestant church is the gathering place of Springfield's town's people every Sunday. Despite pressure from Marge, Homer usually relents from attending the Sunday mass and prefers to stay in his cosy bed. The church is a concrete form of Civil Society as it is a civil institution which spreads the official ideology of the capitalist system. The church's mission is to ensure that people continue to conform in the system and thus also to keep them from revolting against their masters; the employers, bosses and clandestine corporate owners. It is therefore a very powerful and effective example of Civil Society. Assuring the common people's happiness and giving them a purpose in life guarantees the everlasting cycle of the capitalist system.

However, reverend Lovejoy is an unconventional pastor. Frequently, he does things he isn't supposed to do. He is a tolerant man who questions things and forms friendships with people worshipping other religions such as the Rabbi, the Catholic priest and Apu, the Indian grocer. Lovejoy's greatest rival and antagonist is a man from his own league, Homer's very own neighbour Ned Flanders. Ned represents pure fundamentalism in live flesh. His thoughts, lifestyle and deeds are solely based on religion. Flanders is so extreme that he often contradicts with and gets into conflict with reverend Lovejoy. In season 7, Episode 3, the reverend gives him some radical advice and says: "Ned, have you considered any of the other major religions? They're all pretty much the same" ("Home Sweet Home diddly-Dum-Doodily," 1995). He ironically criticizes Ned's fundamentalism for he is more secular than Flanders despite being a pastor. Nevertheless, the church and Springfield Elementary are by far not the only forms of Civil Society in *The Simpsons*. Places such as Moe's Tavern and the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant are among the other variations of the notion of Civil Society in *The Simpsons*.

LOUIS ALTHUSSER AND THE STATE APPARATUSES

Another influential thinker who has succeeded Gramsci is the French philosopher Louis Althusser. Althusser was an inspiring Marxist intellectual who made great contributions to the theory put forward by Antonio Gramsci. Althusser introduces new concepts and conveys his notion on topics such as ideology, state, law and order. He defines two distinct concepts he calls the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and Repressive State Apparatus (RSA). Regarding the notion of ideological state apparatus, he states the following:

I shall call Ideological State Apparatuses a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions. I propose an empirical list of these which will obviously have to be examined in detail, tested, corrected and reorganized. With all these reservations implied by this requirement, we can for the moment regard the following institutions as Ideological State Apparatuses: the religious ISA, the educational ISA, the family ISA, the legal ISA, the political ISA, (the political system, including the different parties) the trade-union ISA, the communications ISA, (press, radio and television etc.) the cultural ISA. (Literature, the arts, sports, etc.) (Althusser, 1984: 17)

Hence, Althusser mentions the difference between the ISA and RSA and asserts that the ideological state apparatus consists of every private institution of the society (family, church, parties, unions etc.) which spreads ideology. (1984: 19) The repressive state apparatus on the other hand belongs to the public domain and generally consists of State institutions such as the police force, the army, security forces etc. The ruling class of the Bourgeoisie meticulously abuse the RSA and the ISA in order to control and oppress the masses belonging to the working class. Althusser claims: "To my knowledge, no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses" (1984: 20). Only with the ideological support of the private domain can the public institutions of the state successfully repress its opponents. To that end, it is virtually impossible to exert long-time control over the masses without the existence of these two vital elements.

While there is a great variety of ideological state apparatuses and in spite of their differences, they are combined within the domain of the ideology of the ruling class. Ideological state apparatuses even from opposing ideologies are able to merge and consolidate in relation to a common focal point (Resch, 1992: 215). Both Gramsci and Althusser have defined and put forward original concepts concerning ideology and power relations within the society. As a result, Gramsci's notion of Civil Society is coherent with Althusser's notion of Ideological State Apparatus. The resemblance lies in the fact that both concepts deal with ideology in their essence and both concepts are related to the private domain of the society.

Althusser goes on to assert that the ideological state apparatus operates through the notion of violence whereas the repressive state apparatus operates mainly through ideology (Althusser, 2014: 244). Althusser further corrects this distinction by claiming that:

The (Repressive) State Apparatus functions massively and predominantly by repression (including physical repression) , while functioning secondarily by ideology. (There is no such thing as a purely repressive apparatus.) For example, the army and the police also function by ideology both to ensure their own cohesion and reproduction, and in the 'values' they propound externally. In the same way but inversely, it is essential to say that for their part the Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic. (There is no such thing as a purely ideological apparatus.) (2014: 244)

Thus, the distinction between these two notions intersects with one another. While violence precedes ideology on the repressive apparatus, vice versa is the case with the ideological apparatus. This presence of repression and ideology is labelled as 'double functioning' and it is emphasized that one precedes the other in a rather cyclical pattern (2014: 245).

As previously mentioned, *The Simpsons* provides a striking and coherent criticism of the contemporary capitalist, American society. Therefore, it is certainly highly ideological and distinct from other cartoons. The show conveys a series of covert messages to the American public. In many ways, *The Simpsons* is a satirical anti-corporate and anti-capitalist manifesto. The portrayal of a typical American, middle-class family with Homer being a worker at the nuclear power plant should not and cannot be a coincidence by all means. There is no doubt that *The Simpsons* is about class and class struggle. The family constantly struggles to get by and pay and endless effort in order to overcome all forms of hardships. Right from the beginning of the series, there are direct implications towards America's lust for money and the so-called "American Dream". In season 2, episode 23, a dialogue between Bart and Lisa follows:

LISA: If we don't get to the convention soon, all the good comics will be gone!

BART: Ah, what do you care about good comics? All you ever buy is Casper the Wimpy Ghost.

LISA: I think it's sad that you equate friendliness with wimpiness, and I hope it'll keep you from ever achieving true popularity.

BART: [showing comics of Casper and Richie Rich] Well, you know what I think? I think Casper is the ghost of Richie Rich.

LISA: Hey, they do look alike!

BART: Wonder how Richie died.

LISA: Perhaps he realized how hollow the pursuit of money really is and took his own life.

MARGE: Kids, could you lighten up a little? (Irwin, Conard, and Skoble, 2001: 135)

In this dialogue, Lisa who represents the intellectual sub-consciousness, questions another popular cartoon character Richie Rich who was quite famous for his fortune and his dog named after the almighty American dollar. She asserts that Richie Rich might have grown tired of accumulating wealth and might have realized that all this frenzy is actually in vain. An obvious questioning and rejection of the American dream takes place here. After all, the American dream is always about the ambition of becoming rich and conveys to people the false message that even the common people can get rich if they work hard enough. The American dream sells hope to the common folk and it is exactly this hope that in its turn exploits the workers' and common people's labour. This exploitation is visible all over the series. Homer Simpson started off as a middle-class nuclear power plant worker and after 30 seasons (30 years) and countless episodes, he still is a miserable middle-class nuclear power plant worker. Despite some efforts to move up in the ladder, he never succeeds and always ends up labouring in Mr. Burns' power plant. This overtly emphasizes the false nature behind the American dream which is in reality nothing else than the American illusion.

Following Gramsci's notion of Civil Society, Louis Althusser's concept of the repressive state apparatus is directly observable in *The Simpsons* as well. In the series, it is worth noting that any institution that is either directly or indirectly connected to the State is totally corrupt. Corruption is actually one of the prominent themes of *The Simpsons*. It conveys us the message that in a capitalist society, all forms of state officials always succumb to bribes and other types of corruption. Their reality completely contradicts with their appearance. This leads us to specific cases of the repressive state apparatus in *The Simpsons*.

The first one is with no doubt the Springfield Police Department. Led by Chief Clancy Wiggum, the police department is an extreme example of how a police force should never be. Chief Wiggum is a stereotypical, fat and lazy police officer who cares about everything except the enforcement of law. He and his police squad are not just lazy but also ultra-corrupt. They lead the city of Springfield in corruption. They often take bribes and engage in crimes themselves. They represent the ultimate corruption of law enforcement in a capitalist society. Even the worst criminal can bribe them with money and this can happen in a matter of seconds. The police have no sense of justice whatsoever. They are not only incompetent of carrying out the duty but they also have no

intention of being good cops. He is often seen eating a doughnut and his most famous lines are: "Take 'em boys" and "Bake 'em boys" (Groening, *The Simpsons*). Wiggum and his force represent the ultimate level of greed and selfishness that government officials can reach in the capitalist system.

Chief Wiggum's biggest accomplice and superior is the mayor of Springfield, Joe Quimby. These two characters need to be analyzed together for they are both concrete instances of the repressive state apparatus. There is no doubt that mayor Quimby is the symbol of corruption in Springfield. It is thanks to Quimby and his dark, corrupt character that chief Wiggum and the police force are able to stay in power for so long. He stands as a symbol for the extremely corrupt and greedy politician in the capitalist system. His mayoral seal says it all: 'Corruptus in Extremis'. His catchphrase is "Vote Quimby!" (Groening, *The Simpsons*) and he often appears with several mistresses. He is also comfortable in taking bribes and stealing tax money. Quimby cares about anything but the town and its people. In any state of emergency, he is always the first one to flee the town. He also makes stupid comments whenever he talks. In season 5, episode 10, the mayor says:

[to the crowd at the Town Hall]

I propose that I use what's, uh, left of the town treasury to move to a more prosperous town and run for mayor. And, uh, once elected, I will send for the rest of you. The, uh, chair recognizes the little chick with the gleam of hope in her eyes. [Lisa gives him her piggy bank] uh, just what I need to tip the sky caps.

[to the crowd]

People, people, let's be a little more realistic. [legalized gambling is suggested] Well now, are there any objections? Very well then, instead of fleeing this town, I'll stay here and grow fat off kickbacks and slush funds.

[to Mr. Burns]

We're thrilled you've decided to build your casino on our water front. ("Springfield or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Legalized Gambling", 1993)

In another instance, in season 4, episode 12, Mayor Quimby states:

Mayor Quimby: We will now hear suggestions for the disbursement of the two million dollars.

Lisa: Don't you mean three million dollars?

Mayor Quimby: (looks around nervously, adjusts his tie) Of course. How silly of me. ("Marge vs the Monorail", 1993)

Most of Quimby's lines are similar to the ones above. It is very interesting that in spite of his ultra-corrupt nature and deeds, Mayor Quimby keeps being re-elected over and over again. This reveals the people's ignorance towards corrupt politicians and lack of resistance against a society in decay. The people of Springfield are unable to react against this order and get rid of their corrupt administrators. Most citizens simply do not care and tend to show passivity and indifference towards political and administrative issues. As a result, the citizens of Springfield take exploitation for granted.

Finally, Althusser's Ideological state apparatus is also overtly visible in Simpsons and as the frontrunner we come across Springfield's nuclear power plant and its almighty boss figure: Mr. Burns. It is generally agreed upon that Charles Montgomery Burns or simply called Mr. Burns is the ultimate stereotype of an evil and greedy capitalist. He is in fact the richest man in Springfield and owns more than half of the city. People of Springfield generally hate Mr. Burns, although he doesn't care a bit. Burns is the symbol of corporate America and perhaps one of the best depictions in the history of popular culture. He truly cannot have enough. He is portrayed as a tremendously evil character with no goodness in him whatsoever. In the *Treehouse of Horror* series, Burns is often depicted as a blood-sucking vampire or simply as Dracula himself. In his main office, he has a button

beneath his desks he does not hesitate to push in case of an emergency. Upon pushing the button, the person standing in front of him falls down into a deep pit. He either pushes the button or utters his favourite catchphrase: "Smithers, release the hounds!" (Groening, *The Simpsons*).

In reality, Mr. Burns is a very lonesome figure. Despite his vast fortune, he is simply the loneliest man in the world. He has nobody but his assistant Waylon Smithers that serves him like an obedient slave. His only purpose in life is to take instructions and do as Mr. Burns says. He is supposed to be Burns' only friend.

Charles Montgomery Burns is the owner of the Springfield Nuclear Power Plant and this is also symbolical of the fact that capitalism has no respect for any living creature, not even for nature itself. Whenever, the Nuclear Power Plant appears in the series, pollution also appears as the Plant lacks every single safety measure a decent plant needs. As a matter of fact, the plant's name is synonymous for radioactive pollution. Thus, the Plant pollutes Springfield's air, rivers and of course its very own residents. Mr. Burns' poor health is largely due to his lifelong exposure to radiation. His body has absorbed radiation so much that he sometimes glows green in the dark. Burns' legal destruction of nature and all its living beings stands symbolical for the harm that capitalism poses on our society. In season 2, episode 4 (Two Cars in Every Garage and Three Eyes on Every Fish) Bart catches a three-eyed fish from the river and this causes the nuclear plant to get inspection. Failing to bribe the inspectors, Burns eventually decides to run for governor. He abuses Darwin's theory of evolution and claims that the three-eyed fish is a super fish and that it is tastier than regular fish (King & Auriffeille, 235). Upon inviting him for dinner with the Simpson family, he is served the super fish but immediately spits it out, causing an immediate end to his campaign (235). Later on, the name Blinky was given to the three-eyed fish. As Dr. Anne Marie Todd of San Jose State University points out:

Blinky serves as a visual reminder of the clash between official polemics and environmental facts on the ground, even if three-eyed fish don't really swim around the rivers near power plants - This episode condemns the manipulation of political and economic power to disguise ecological accountability, and shift blame for environmental problems. The show comments on the lack of adherence to safety standards for the plant, and criticizes the apathetic acceptance of unforced environmental inspections. Finally, this episode explicitly criticizes media spin-doctors who distort the impacts of ecological degradation caused by wealthy corporations like the nuclear power plant. (King & Auriffeille, 2013: 237)

As Homer Simpson is a worker in Mr. Burns' power plant, Burns and Homer meet on many occasions and in many episodes. Despite this, Burns always seems to forget Homer and never recognizes him. In season 4, episode 17, this is obvious in a dialogue:

Mr. Burns: Who is that firebrand, Smithers?

Smithers: That's Homer Simpson.

Mr. Burns: Simpson, eh? New man?

Smithers: He thwarted your campaign for governor, you ran over his son, he saved the plant from meltdown, his wife painted you in the nude...

Mr. Burns: Doesn't ring a bell. ("Last exit to Springfield", 1993)

Mr. Burns and his Nuclear Power Plant are perfect examples of Althusser's ideological state apparatus because his power and influence are at such a level that he can bend the laws and abuse the State's institutions whenever and however he wishes. Mr. Burns' ideology is that of savage capitalism. According to Burns, only the fittest shall survive and those who are not fit enough are not worthy of recognition, of a decent life and can easily be wasted. Mr. Burns is a successful stereotype of a ruthless, American capital holder. In earlier episodes, it has been revealed that Mr. Burns' immense fortune and his nuclear power plant are fully inherited from his ancestors. In other words, Burns is no rags to riches but a fortunate man who has been tremendously wealthy since the very first day he was born.

Another representative of the ideological state apparatus is the famous television anchor Kent Brockman. Brockman presents the news in a fully ideological style and serves the stories to the public wrapped and

embedded in judgment. This anchor presents news at its worst possible and most subjective level. Brockman thereby serves as an effective critique of the American media that is run by the corporate powers. Brockman thus reshapes the truth and embeds people's brains with so called news from the dominant ideology. Jonathan Gray comments on the aspect of Kent Brockman's news and asserts that:

By depicting the artificiality of the news' reembedding strategies, and by suggesting alternative explanations of how and why the news works as it does, *The Simpsons* works to engender or further nourish a suspicion and distrust of the news. In the world of discourse, the news aims for coronation. The news is fundamentally a discourse of Truth, Fact and History. (2012: 97)

There are many more instances of Althusser's ideological state apparatus in *The Simpsons*. Krusty the clown, Homer's fundamentalist neighbour Ned Flanders, the bogus Dr. Nick Riviera, the fake scientist Prof. Frick, the ultra-violent cartoon Itchy and Scratchy Show, Moe's tavern etc. The show is literally loaded with ideological state apparatuses. What most of them have in common is the fact that they all support the dominant ideology and values set by the capitalist order: stealing, bribing, fooling, brainwashing, conforming, faking etc. These values are normalized within the capitalist society only for the sake of personal gain and the accumulation of wealth. This is exactly what is satirized by *The Simpsons*. The audience tends to laugh at it due to its hilarious nature, often not realizing the serious implications that lie beneath them. It is observed that both the ideological and repressive state apparatuses function collaboratively in the society:

The RSA performs its social function, namely, maintaining the economic dominance of the ruling class or class alliance, through force or the immediate threat of force. [...] On the other hand, the ISAs perform their social function, which is also maintaining the economic dominance of the ruling class or class alliance, through ideological discourse. [...] The RSA and the ISAs, that is, work together to maintain the order of the state. (Ferreter, 2006: 84)

The harmonious relationship between the ideological and repressive state apparatus results in the consolidation of the power of the ruling classes. Their presence not only provides the continuance of their hegemony but also ensures the dominance of the lower classes for many years to come. This is openly revealed in *The Simpsons* as there are deeply rooted connections between the representatives of these two notions. Mayor Quimby's extra corrupt policies are covered up by the police force that in their turn take bribes from politicians and from influential businessmen such as Mr. Burns in return for the cover up of their dirty relationships and their illegal activities at the Springfield nuclear power plant. It can be asserted that in *The Simpsons* all characters related to the ideological and repressive state apparatus are in one way or the other interconnected with one another. While the state, mayor and the police force assert their hegemony through power, local businessmen, clergy and other public figures endorse hegemonic forces by supplying them the necessary ideological reinforcement.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it needs to be stated that it is virtually impossible to fit a comprehensive analysis of *The Simpsons* into one single article. It would take many dissertations to comprehensively analyze *The Simpsons* not simply because it has over 600 episodes but because of its deep, covert implications and its detailed characters. Therefore, this study has selected to conduct a general Gramscian and Althusserian analysis of the series. *The Simpsons* is a unique show for the reason that it exposes the incongruities of the American society. It is exactly that incongruity which makes the series so entertaining and appealing to the public (Henry, 2012: 153).

The presence of Gramscian and Althusserian references are in complete consistence with one another. Gramsci's notion of civil society conforms to Althusser's concept of the ideological state apparatus. All the representatives of the private domain in *The Simpsons* such as the school, the church, the families and the media all adhere to and unite around the dominant ideology of the ruling class. These bodies allow themselves to be exploited for the sake of the ruling class' perpetuity. These private bodies ensure the infrastructure of the ruling class' hegemony which is eventually consolidated and constantly reinforced by the representatives of the public domain which Althusser labels as the repressive state apparatus. Thus, the police force, the local governor, the mayor and the state act as a force to remind the common folk of those that are actually in charge. As the ultimate

form of authority, these institutions keep the masses under surveillance and in complete control. They also serve as a deterrent that fulfills the function of an everlasting threat which keeps people from rebelling against them and against the dominant class they seem to serve.

As discussed by Brook: "Working within and against the class-infected constraints of what Jane Feuer calls "quality television", *The Simpsons* both exposes and cuts through such constraints to create a consistently satirical and occasionally subversive commentary on contemporary American society" (Alberti & Brook, 2004: 172). *The Simpsons* fulfills its duty of exposing the various controversies and revealing the problematic notions within the American society using well-constructed satire.

Homer Simpson in person represents the typical laborer of the American working class. In every episode, he struggles to take care of his family and to provide a better life for them. Yet, no matter what he does, Homer cannot succeed in climbing up the class ladder and despite this futile struggle, the Simpson family somehow live happily ever after. To that end, the covert message behind this television show is one of submissiveness and passivity. The working class ought to live the life that they were assigned and not even dare to ask for more. *The Simpsons* insists on the status quo of the working class Americans and does so within the defined boundaries. Thus, the happiness that *The Simpsons* actually display is not truly genuine but rather artificial and leaves various social issues and serious problems unresolved.

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Beyan ve Açıklamalar (Disclosure Statements)

1. Bu çalışmanın yazarları, araştırma ve yayın etiği ilkelerine uyduklarını kabul etmektedirler (The authors of this article confirm that their work complies with the principles of research and publication ethics).
2. Yazarlar tarafından herhangi bir çıkar çatışması beyan edilmemiştir (No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors).
3. Bu çalışma, intihal tarama programı kullanılarak intihal taramasından geçirilmiştir (This article was screened for potential plagiarism using a plagiarism screening program).