

# Marx v. Bezos : South Park's first labor episodes

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# Marx v. Bezos: *South Park*'s First Labor Episodes

Christian Hänggi

Over the course of more than twenty years and nearly 300 episodes, the cartoon series *South Park* has not shown a great measure of interest in or empathy with the plight of the working class. When labor issues were at stake, they were mostly connected to immigration or technology, and the workers were depicted as mindless rednecks. It therefore came as a surprise when *South Park* aired the double episode “Unfulfilled”/“Bike Parade” in December of 2018, taking aim at Amazon.com Inc. and its founder and CEO Jeff Bezos. The two episodes are remarkable for their awareness of American labor history and for drawing parallels to the robber barons of the industrial era. While Bezos is shown as a dehumanized and ruthless businessman with a disembodied voice, the Amazon employees are portrayed as desperate but socially aware human beings that even attend evening lectures on Marxism. This chapter contemplates the change *South Park* has undergone in its depiction of the working class. In the end, lectures on Marxism notwithstanding, it may not be socialism so much as anarchism that shows the way.

Keywords: *South Park*, labor, Marxism, Amazon, Jeff Bezos

At the time of writing, the U.S. American cartoon series *South Park* has just gone into its 24<sup>th</sup> season, making it the second longest-running cartoon series. Over the course of the years, it has seen four different Presidents of the United States, the rise of the internet, social protests, and stock exchange crashes, and it has helped to shape the nature of what can be seen and said on TV.<sup>1</sup> With humor schooled by Monty Python and adapted to the level of an American, mostly male, teenager, *South Park* has mocked, subverted, and honored a great array of public figures, organizations, and belief systems of American pop lore and current affairs.

While the show's main characters have always belonged to the working class in a broad sense, the social or political ramifications of this were consistently eclipsed or, in rare cases when they did come up, did not receive the balanced treatment that *South Park* afforded so many other topics. It is important to note here that while *South Park* can be merciless in its depiction of everything and everyone its makers decide to mock, it is also capable of sympathy toward particular causes or viewpoints. At the same time, in the world of *South Park*, this empathy, which is usually reflected through serious consideration of a particular viewpoint or by showing doubt or suffering without immediate subversion, offers no guarantee that the cause at hand will not ultimately be subject to ridicule in one way or another. Although *South Park* tends to opt for the middle ground between two perceived extremes, this middle ground is articulated by giving the grievances of both sides a more or less equal hearing. By this standard, *South Park* has not shown a great measure of interest in or empathy with the plight of workers over the course of nearly 300 episodes. This changed in season 22 (2018) with the double episode "Unfulfilled" and "Bike Parade" that took aim at Amazon.com, Inc. and its founder and CEO, Jeff Bezos.

With the rise of the data-driven corporations, mostly of Silicon Valley origin or spirit, capitalism appears to have entered a new age of information, production, and consumption—but also a new age of labor. Even though some of these corporations, for instance Amazon and Uber, do sell physical products or tangible services, the actual business models are based on or *consist of* the collection, computation, and

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<sup>1</sup> In a video essay, Youtuber kaptainkristian argues that "*South Park* has really blazed the trail for social acceptability in obscene content." He claims that *South Park* made the word "pussy" acceptable as early as 1998 (six years before Amy Schumer was credited for uncensoring the word on Comedy Central, see McGlynn) and that it helped profanity like "goddamn" become acceptable on TV. Most notable is the episode "It Hits the Fan" (S05E01) where a counter tracks the use of the words "shit" and "shitty," uttered uncensored a total of 162 times (plus 38 written occurrences).

commercialization—in short, the *commodification*—of large amounts of personal and formerly private user data. A great array of scholars and analysts have tried to make sense not only of this change but also of how our era is different from the capitalism of bygone times. Depending on the focus of their analyses, this new era or aspects thereof have been termed: information age (Manuel Castells), sharing economy (Rachel Botsman and Roo Rogers), digital capitalism (Dan Schiller), hypercapitalism (Jeremy Rifkin), late capitalism (Fredric Jameson), or surveillance capitalism (Shoshana Zuboff), among many more. What most authors seem to agree on is that what we are dealing with is still capitalism, although transformed or exacerbated. To understand the ways in which it may have changed with respect to the Industrial Revolution, first or second, it is of use to refer to Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *Communist Manifesto*—and, judging by the verbatim quotes from that text, this is precisely what Trey Parker did when he wrote the two Amazon episodes.

By harking back to the *Communist Manifesto*, *South Park*'s premise appears to be that, technological developments notwithstanding, nothing much has changed in the relationship between the owners of the means of production and the proletariat since Marx and Engels first presented their analysis in 1848. Whether or not this first impression holds true will be the subject of discussion in this chapter.

### The Labor Politics of *South Park*

The politics of *South Park* and its makers are somewhat complicated. *Rolling Stone*'s Vanessa Grigoriadis writes that it is the “most ideologically opaque political show on television.” Matt Stone is “against the War on Drugs, pro-gay marriage, against socialized medicine and basically in favor of free markets, except in cases like dropping public funding for roads or education.” She further writes that, “Neither Stone nor Parker will delineate his political views, and both contend that the libertarian label, which has been applied to them in recent years, is not entirely appropriate” (Grigoriadis 2007). Which also means it is not entirely inappropriate. In an interview with the libertarian *Reason* magazine, Matt Stone said: “I think [libertarian] is an apt description for me personally, and that has probably seeped into the show. But we never set out to do a libertarian show.” Parker, on the other hand, was reluctant about labeling himself a libertarian (Gillespie and Walker). Their pro-free market views and their history of ridiculing liberals go a long way to explain why their

harsh depiction of Amazon and Bezos and their portrayal of the working class along Marxist lines in the two episodes discussed here took critics and fans by surprise. In the end, however, careful inspection shows that their scathing criticism of Amazon and their sympathetic portrayal of the working class cannot simply be broken down into Marx v. Bezos or Classic Socialism v. Globalized Capitalism.

While *South Park* has had a mixed history of the portrayal of large corporations, its portrayal of the working class has always been unequivocal. In an episode entitled “Gnomes” (S02E07), the creators show little sympathy for the small coffee shop when Starbucks (or “Harbucks”) moves into town offering superior coffee. The episode “Something Wall-Mart This Way Comes” (S08E09) offers many parallels with the Amazon episodes. In it, Walmart is the antagonist, an impersonal and inhuman force that exerts its evil attraction on the townspeople, many of whom end up working for Walmart so that they can buy more things there with a 10% discount. The major difference with respect to the Amazon episodes is that, in the end, destroying the Walmart branch is futile as another one pops up the very next day. What is more, questions of working conditions and labor struggles are not discussed in the Walmart episode.

Up until the Amazon episodes, *South Park* has quite consistently been derisive of the working class. Workers were nearly always depicted as redneck males, for the most part inarticulate, and to a significant part dim-witted, waving Confederate flags and yelling “They took our jobs!”—a phrase which ultimately triggers wave after wave of Pavlovian repetition resulting in increasingly incomprehensible utterances. While this may, of course, be an ironic twist to show liberals what they really think about the working class they pretend to protect, this portrayal did not change much with the rise of the IT sector and its business models, which have ushered in a reality in which the seven largest companies in the world (by market capitalization) are largely data-driven.<sup>2</sup> In a 2017 episode (S21E01) on virtual assistants such as Amazon’s Echo, a group of unemployed workers hang out in a sports bar, many of them drawn as the offspring of incestual relationships, echoing the depiction of participants at a Ku Klux Klan rally in the film *Mississippi Burning* (1988). One character complains, “Every day, people are buying more and more o’ them Amazon Google thingies while we all sit here and lose our jobs! [...] Automated personal

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<sup>2</sup> For 2020, ranks two through eight were occupied by Microsoft, Apple, Amazon, Alphabet, Facebook, Alibaba, and Tencent Holdings. See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/263264/top-companies-in-the-world-by-market-capitalization/>.

assistants, self-drivin' trucks... Whatever happened to *people jobs*?" The pronouncement, as regular viewers of the cartoon series might expect, triggers another character to yell, "They took our jobs!" and the Confederate flag waving begins, thus immediately undermining the worker's legitimate concern. In a 2014 episode riffing on Uber (S18E04), the TV series implies that the traditional cab drivers are at fault for not making an effort to improve their customer experience, leaving their vehicles littered with trash, blaring loud music from the radio, and smoking in the car. While criticism of this uneven portrayal of the working class may be in order, it also appears that the makers of *South Park* realized, albeit in grossly exaggerated form, that in past decades, it was mainly the political right that had successfully cast itself as the sole interpreters for and representatives of the working class.

*South Park* episodes are written and produced in the week leading up to their release (Grigoriadis), which allows the show to comment on current events in a time frame unparalleled by other cartoons. In the last years, *South Park's* ten-episode seasons typically went on air between September and December, which meant that for about nine months of every year, they did not comment on current events but sometimes incorporated some of this content later. The first of the two episodes, "Unfulfilled," aired on 5 December 2018, nine months after Bezos had been declared the world's wealthiest individual by *Forbes* (Dolan and Kroll) and about three months after his company had brushed the one-trillion-dollar market capitalization mark.<sup>3</sup> On 13 November 2018, Amazon announced that it chose New York City and Northern Virginia as the locations of its second North American headquarters (HQ2), receiving from New York City alone USD 1.525 billion in incentives.<sup>4</sup> The very next day, the first of many protests against this decision was held in Long Island City (which, by February 2019, led to Amazon's withdrawal). On 17 November, *Saturday Night Live* showed a sketch with Steve Carell impersonating Bezos, to the consternation of many critics. *Saturday Night Live* co-host Colin Hanks commented: "New York basically won the lottery and we're like, 'Eh, but the subways might be slightly more crowded.'" As David Sims of *The Atlantic* put it: "the show made a baffling decision to present Bezos as the suave antithesis of the president."

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of writing, Amazon is the world's fourth most valuable company with a market capitalization of USD 1.646 trillion. See <https://companiesmarketcap.com/amazon/marketcap/>.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed chronology of events, see Plitt (2019).



At the same time—though, as far as I can tell, it went unnoticed by *South Park*'s critics—the first mass demonstration of the gilets jaunes, the yellow vests, took place in France. Similarly unnoticed was that around Black Friday, 23 November 2018, Amazon Fulfillment Centers in Italy, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom went on strike to protest inhumane working conditions and demand better pay. While the German strike was sparked by the ver.di union, the *South Park* strike did not need or have union support, which would have been difficult anyway, considering the resistance Amazon has consistently mounted against any sort of organization on the part of its employees in the U.S.<sup>5</sup>

With all this context in mind, let us move on to the Amazon episodes. In my discussion, I will follow the main plot line chronologically.<sup>6</sup>

### Unfulfilled (S22E09)

“Unfulfilled” is precluded by Tennessee Ernie Ford’s 1955 recording of the coal miner song “16 Tons,” which deplores the involuntary servitude of workers dependent on their employer for both the little money they are able to earn and the necessities in the company-owned store for which they are forced to spend their hard-won wages. The chorus goes:

You load sixteen tons, and what do you get?  
 Another day older and deeper in debt.  
 St. Peter don't you call me 'cause I can't go,  
 I owe my soul to the company store.

In a brilliant translation of the company store practice of mining companies and other corporations of the industrial era, the song is illustrated by Stephen Stotch carpooling to his new job at the Amazon Fulfillment Center. When he comes home in the evening, the Amazon packages with household items he had ordered the day before are already waiting for him. Later, in his pajamas and just before going to bed, he orders yet another unnecessary item from Amazon. The next day, he goes through the same grind, arriving

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<sup>5</sup> As early as 2000, Amazon shut down a call center after a campaign to unionize its 400 employees, and as recently as October 2020, a leaked document revealed “how the company is making significant investments in technology to track and counter the threat of unionization” (Del Rey and Ghaffary).

<sup>6</sup> It is recommended that the reader watch the two episodes before continuing this article as it will contain all sorts of spoilers, such as the following synopsis, which will be expanded upon further down. *South Park* episodes are available for free at [www.southparkstudios.com](http://www.southparkstudios.com) and [www.southpark.de](http://www.southpark.de)

home again just as the Amazon delivery drone is dropping off a horn for the bike parade his son Butters is looking forward to. The company store, in this case Amazon.com, is the shop of choice for its employees, but before long, all the local shops close down, eliminating any possible alternatives. Even the mall passes out of people's memory, its sales staff degenerate into something like the living dead, and when, later in the story, the South Park children want to buy things for the bike parade, nothing they need is in stock. Amazon, *South Park* seems to say, has entrapped everyone in a closed system, a cybernetically regulated economy in the company store logic of the era of the robber barons.

A workplace accident leaves maimed and mangled section manager Josh Carter wrapped up in an Amazon box. Shortly after his accident, the camera zooms in on Crunchy's Micro Brew, a company pub on the Fulfillment Center's compound serving Amazon, Amazon Lite, and Amazon IPA. The atmosphere is subdued, not a smile anywhere, and almost all of the workers wear orange vests, possibly as a nod to the *gilets jaunes* movement. This time, it is a mixed crowd of men and women, and there are no Confederate flags in sight. The Irish band is singing:

Workin' me fingers to the bone,  
 I need me a drink before goin' home.  
 Be back in the mornin',  
 Pack boxes at dawn,  
 Workin' for Amazon.

Everything in the Irish American company pub is designed to remind the viewer of workers in the industrial era. The Amazon workforce in South Park is predominantly white, which may simply reflect *South Park's* predominantly white population or represent an explicit attempt to draw a connection to European labor history. Harking back to the wave of Irish immigration starting with the potato famine of 1845–49, there is an unusual number of red-haired patrons present. Mr. Zewiski—an Irish immigrant with a name signifying Polish ancestry—both arms tied up in casts, presumably the result of another workplace accident, complains: “What the fook are we doin’, anyway? Breakin’ our backs! Loadin’ up fo’klifts! Gettin’ paper cuts from boxes! And for what?! A measly paycheck that just barely covers our online purchases!” When Stuart McCormick, whose name suggests Irish ancestry as well, reads an Amazon press statement blaming the accident on human error, the workers erupt into indignation and decide to go on strike—“For Josh!”

The time of the Irish potato famine, 1848 in particular, was a tumultuous period for Europe, which saw numerous revolts and



revolutions and the publication of Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*. Irish immigration to the U.S., of course, continued after the famine, and much of how it is captured in the American imagination, I would claim, is predicated on its depiction in popular films, from the Irish gangs in *The Godfather* (1972) to *Angela's Ashes* (1999) and beyond. Later in the "Unfulfilled" episode, Stephen Stotch begins to dress in attire reminiscent of workers of the periods depicted in such films as well as those in photographs of demonstrations for the release of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti around 1927.

As South Park's Amazon employees are demonstrating in front of the Fulfillment Center, their placards announcing the strike and solidarity with Josh, a TV newsman reports to his audience that the workers are striking for more respect and more money, a demand which echoes the famous "Bread and Roses" slogan associated with the 1912 textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts. He interviews Josh, who uses his airtime to give a 101 lesson on Marxism: "There's those at the top who control the means of production and then there's the working class who enables those means by selling their labor power for wages. When there's conflict, the ruling class tries to blame the working class." Later on, he even paraphrases the end of the *Communist Manifesto* when he says: "We have nothing to lose but our chains." His eloquence and education make it clear that this is no longer the exaggeratedly stupid, unreflecting, Republican-voting worker of earlier *South Park* episodes, but the politically active worker of the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century, highly expressive and well-versed in socialist and Marxist terminology. He holds speeches—not only to Congress in Washington D.C. but to packed auditoriums of Amazon workers and townspeople, too. This is the worker/citizen we know from books such as Angela Davis's *Women, Race & Class* or the politically interested citizen with an attention span allowing for sustained arguments described by Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Although Bernie Sanders and his fellow campaigners of the New Left have not yet made an appearance in *South Park*, Stone and Parker seem to acknowledge that there is a serious effort underway to put democratic socialism (or social democracy) back on the agenda, to take the plight of the working class seriously, and to avoid talking down to the working class or appealing to baser instincts. Between the lines, they actually seem to pay respect to the New Left, something they have not otherwise chosen to do with established liberal politicians or the Democratic Party as such.

Over the years, *South Park* naturally took aim at and ridiculed some of the most well-known personalities of the tech industry—including Bill

Gates of Microsoft (S17E08, among others), Steve Jobs of Apple (S15E01 and others), Elon Musk of Space-X and Tesla (S20, various episodes), and Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook (S21E04)—however the criticism focused more on the social issues brought about by the technology and its uses and abuses and less on working conditions. Bill Gates and, to a lesser extent, Steve Jobs were depicted as ruthless or outright evil (as opposed to a remorseful, sympathetic Charles Manson, a quite likable Satan, or even Cthulhu, Ruler of Darkness, who is portrayed as bumbling and naive). With the inclusion of Jeff Bezos, *South Park* has broadened its repertoire. From the moment he steps into Mayor McDaniel's office, asking her to "have a seat," it is clear who dominates the town. His disembodied voice appears to come from nowhere and everywhere, and the back of his head is a butt. The bluntly literal message appears to be that Bezos is a butthead or an asshole. At the same time, he represents the specter of capitalism haunting South Park, and the force behind the alienation of the workers.<sup>7</sup> The episode's title, "Unfulfilled," also hints at the failure of this type of warehouse labor to allow workers to ascend to the top of Maslow's pyramid and reach the level of self-fulfillment. As one former mall employee says when asked to pack a box to fulfill an order: "This isn't very fulfilling."

Bezos's first tactic designed to beat the mayor and the strikers into obedience is to withdraw their Prime membership—and it is precisely here that *South Park* delineates the crucial difference between today's labor struggles and those of the past. As the Bezos character correctly states, we are dealing not with the simple category of the worker or the worker-citizen, but with the consumer-worker—obviously, the term "consumer" must come first as work is only a means to attain the ability to consume (the citizen as a category is not even mentioned). This is not the worker who goes to the company store to buy toilet paper and diapers or bread and milk, but a consumer-worker of the latter-day instant-gratification society for whom shopping is an essential activity done in solitude and whose purchases are non-essential and effected by the push of a button. Although Stephen Stotch was never happy about going on strike in the first place, it is the withdrawal of his Prime membership that makes him break the picket line. As the Bezos character observes, watching Stotch pray through his Alexa View: "Without his Amazon Prime status,

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<sup>7</sup> According to the Wikipedia article of the "Unfulfilled" episode, Bezos is "depicted as one of the alien Talosians from the original 1965 Star Trek pilot 'The Cage,'" providing a further link to the alienation of the workers.

he fluctuates between being and non-being [...]. Torn between memberships, the consumer-worker will reason that the strike is pointless.”

Meanwhile, a counter-strike has been organized, in the words of the news reporter, by “angry customers who wish to be fulfilled.” One such customer is Randy Marsh, who, over the course of the preceding episodes, has established a large marijuana business. Marsh tells the newsman, “I have a weed business to run. I need my shit from Amazon to make it all work,” to which boxed employee Josh replies in a now familiar voice: “At what cost, sir? Do you care that personal worth is being reduced by capitalists to its exchange value? [...] Free trade is not freedom. Perhaps socialism *is* the answer.” The first episode ends with a voice-over by Josh, which begins with the opening lines of the *Communist Manifesto*, followed by a summary of Engels’s Preface to the 1883 German edition and concludes with the closing lines of the *Manifesto*:

The history of this world is the history of class struggles. Alienated from the products of their labor, from their fellow laborers, and from their very essence, the oppressed worker will eventually strike back at those capitalists who control the means of production. We have nothing to lose but our chains. We will unite in revolution!

The opening line of the first section of the *Communist Manifesto* reads: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” It ends with the lines: “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. Working Men of All Countries, Unite!”

In a satirical show like *South Park*, literal, earnest actions are not always easy to interpret, but engaging art requires ambiguity, even if it sometimes stems from the literal. By having textbook Marxist Josh recite his lessons on socialism with all the right key words, *South Park* may well be implying that he, too, is unable to question his own ideology. The implicit message may be that he is a lost case, an anachronism that has not been able to adapt to present times. He is, after all, stuck in a box. Nevertheless, the unusual sincerity with which he is treated and the refusal to immediately subvert his position, particularly with respect to *South Park*’s history of dismissal of the working class, does suggest some measure of respect toward his views or his steadfastness, even if the sole object is to attack the wealthiest individual on the planet—the greatest robber baron of them all. When the newsman asks Josh if he can leave the box, he replies: “No, the box is holding my insides together. If I leave it, all my guts will spill out and I’ll die.” Echoing Marx and Engels, this seems to say that it is capitalism which produced the proletariat. Once capitalism is gone, the concept of the proletariat becomes obsolete. Another reading could be

that, deplorable working conditions notwithstanding, many workers have no choice but submit to the demands of companies like Amazon in order to make a living.

No show on the subject of striking can do without the drama of strike-breakers, particularly, I would posit, in an American context, with its history of labor struggles, subversion by sinister forces, and unholy alliances between corporations, the state, and private security companies such as the Pinkertons,<sup>8</sup> exacerbated by the outright economic despair of a large portion of the population.<sup>9</sup> In the case of *South Park*, Stotch is the first and only former employee to break the picket line. Later, he is joined by a busload of zombie-like salespeople from the local mall, which has fallen into dereliction and disrepair. A handful of other townspeople join him grudgingly because this is the only way they can get their stuff from Amazon. *FBE React*, an online series by Fine Brothers Entertainment, has screened the two *South Park* episodes to current and former Amazon warehouse workers and recorded their responses. They attest that *South Park* displays a high level of insight into the spirit and processes at Amazon, albeit occasionally in a hyperbolic fashion. One of the employees feels that: “There’s always someone who is willing to take your job for half the money” (*FBE React*).

### Bike Parade (S22E10)

The second episode, “Bike Parade,” opens with Stan, Kyle, Kenny, and Cartman—the four children around which *South Park* is traditionally centered—receiving their Amazon shipments for a bike parade in exchange for helping Bezos hire the mall employees. While it is the family fathers on both sides of the picket line who worry about their inability to provide for their families—meaning to make sure they can buy frivolous items to be delivered the next day—it is the children who get the Amazon operation back in place. Meanwhile, Bezos is listening in on all private conversations with the Amazon Echo personal assistant installed in everyone’s homes in order to find out which of the townspeople are complying with his wishes and which are still putting up resistance and need

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<sup>8</sup> The Pinkerton detective agency, which has played a violent role in subverting and breaking or attempting to break many of the great strikes in American history, is now a subsidiary of the Swedish Securitas AB (not to be confused with the Swiss Securitas AG).

<sup>9</sup> In this sense, it is instructive to see that Amazon’s market capitalization exploded during the hardship of the coronavirus pandemic from USD 1 trillion (21 January 2020) to nearly USD 1.7 trillion (3 February 2021).

to be coerced into obedience. Here, several aspects of the subject of surveillance capitalism are broached, for instance a concentration of knowledge in corporate hands, human experience as raw material to be extracted, or the imposition of a collective order based on certainty.<sup>10</sup> There is no need to hire corporate spies because people eagerly pay to buy into their own surveillance.<sup>11</sup> The data thus obtained allows *South Park*'s Bezos to not only monitor but also manipulate the behavior of the people.

For some of the townsfolk, the desperation to receive their goods from Amazon is so great that they enlist as workers and travel to the Fulfillment Center in a reinforced bus along with the former mall employees. Filing past the demonstrators, "scab" Stotch is informed that Josh has gone missing. He was kidnapped by Bezos and placed on a chair in an empty, prison-like warehouse hall. In the presence of Mayor McDaniels, the Amazon CEO tells Alexa to "Go ahead, send them in." "Them," it turns out, refers to the town's children, desperate to receive a present they can adorn their bikes with. In a gruesome scene, they fight over the box, eventually releasing an explosion of Josh's organs and killing him instantly, to the horror of the mayor and the trauma of the children. With this execution scene, the viewer is again reminded of landmark events in the history of American labor struggle. Although they differ in key moments, one cannot help but think of the executions of Joe Hill in 1915 or those of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927, the latter of whom was strapped to an electric chair and executed in the midst of the Roaring Twenties.<sup>12</sup> In the long history of labor struggle, innumerable labor and union activists lost their lives in massacres or executions orchestrated by local authorities working together with the besieged corporations, from the deaths that lead to the Haymarket Affair in 1886 to the Ludlow Massacre in 1914, the executions of Hill, Sacco, Vanzetti, and

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<sup>10</sup> I am referring to Shoshana Zuboff's definition of surveillance capitalism, which is more complex, enumerating eight different, at times interlocked, aspects of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, opening pages [n. pag.])

<sup>11</sup> S21E01 is centered around voice-controlled assistants but entirely eschews the fact that the business of Amazon, Google, and Apple is built on the extraction and commodification of data. Similarly, the first episode of season 24, which treated the topic of COVID-19, failed to illustrate that, within little more than a week of the beginning of the first lockdowns, the entire Western world entered a new age of surveillance with everyone, from elementary school children to their grandparents, relying on video conference systems by Zoom, Microsoft, Google, and Apple.

<sup>12</sup> When the first episode was released, the NASDAQ Composite Index noted around USD 7,500, compared to around USD 1,700 in February 2009, shortly after the subprime crash, pointing to yet another "roaring" decade (which, to date, has not ended: Since then, the NASDAQ has climbed steadily, reaching USD 14,000 in February 2021).



others, to operations such as the FBI's countersubversion program COINTELPRO. To my mind, the execution of Josh has no basis in the history of Amazon, but Amazon (in line with general anti-union policies of U.S. corporations) definitely has a history of trying to prevent the formation of unions and laying off workers who attempt to organize.<sup>13</sup>

At this point, if not before, another aspect of *South Park's* criticism of latter-day capitalism comes into play. The show does not necessarily postulate, as Josh does, that "Perhaps socialism is the answer," but aligns more closely with a libertarian view, namely that the state should not intervene in the business sphere—or conversely, that business should not seek favors from the government.<sup>14</sup> In the course of the conversations between Bezos and Mayor McDaniels, it is made clear that the mayor has been subservient to Amazon's corporate needs and desires—from accommodating the Fulfillment Center in the first place to armoring the strike-breakers' bus, to being present at Josh's execution (although, to be fair, McDaniels did not appear to know she attending an execution), and finally, to giving up the mayor's office to Bezos. As Jared Bauer says in a YouTube video for Wisecrack:

The last two episodes seem to further a criticism of government involvement in the market, specifically the way business-minded politicians get in bed with giant corporations to create a grotesque version of the free market. If the workers are selling their soul to the company store, towns and governments are selling their soul to Jeff Bezos's throbbing skull. [...] The creation of jobs holds local governments functionally hostage to their whims. (Opperman, Luxemburg, Bauer)

Apart from the threat of losing their Amazon Prime membership (or the desire to get it back), *South Park* identifies another driving force behind working people's reluctance to become and stay politically active, namely the fathers' traditional role as family providers that has been deeply ingrained in their self-image to the point of self-deception. Stephen Stotch breaks the picket line because he tells himself that he cannot disappoint his son Butters, who wishes to be in the bike parade. In the second episode, it

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<sup>13</sup> One of the latest incidents was the layoff of three activists as reported on 14 April 2020 (Del Rey).

<sup>14</sup> There are, of course, many shades of libertarianism, from left-libertarianism to anarcho-capitalism, with different goals and political issues at the center of the debate. In this reading, I focus on the free-market dimensions of libertarian beliefs: "Libertarians defend market freedoms, and demand limitations on the use of the state for social policy" (Kymlicka 95). For a more in-depth discussion, see Will Kymlicka's entire chapter on Libertarianism (95–159).



is made clear that the threat of disappointment is, for the most part, something Stotch projects into his son in order to hide from himself the fact that it is he, the father, who is addicted to online shopping. Irish immigrant Mr. Zewiski, too, eventually caves to his son's demands: "Every year, I win the bike parade. It's the one thing I care about. Now there's kids out there who have better bikes than me because you won't get off your ass and work, Dad!" Just as Mr. Zewiski walks out the door to break the picket line, his marijuana delivery from Tegridy Farms arrives.

This represents another turning point in the plot. Starting in episode four of that season, Randy Marsh, fed up with the alienated life in town, decides he wants to "go back to simpler times" and moves his family to the countryside to start a marijuana business to "live off the land." Before long, however, his farm has grown to industrial proportions, and Randy, as viewers suspected all along, has become just another self-serving capitalist. While he capitalizes on everything he can, he continues to cultivate a small farmer's image, which may be read as a kick in the shin to feel-good capitalist corporations like Whole Foods who also profit from their image of integrity. He serves both the strikers, who need some relief from the hardship of striking, and the unfulfilled Amazon customers, who have a hard time dealing with their missing deliveries. By the time his business associate, Towelie, arrives at the Zewiski home with the delivery, Tegridy Farms already has an app and is delivering the goods on e-scooters (another impersonal evil force, as depicted the season's Halloween special, S22E05).

In the end, it is not socialism that saves the day for South Park's grown-ups but another up-and-coming capitalist, Randy Marsh, whose "tegridy" does not extend beyond his own PR speak. Toward the end of the episode, the doped-up proletarians of South Park unite in front of City Hall to tell Bezos to "take your Fulfillment Center and fulfill it right up your ass." Their self-designated spokesperson, Randy Marsh, who formerly opposed the strike, babbles at length about 'tegridy before losing his train of thought in classic stoner fashion.

Cut to the penultimate shot: the bike parade (sponsored by City Wok, Tegridy Farms, and La Taco) can finally take place. The adults line the streets, all smoking pot—from the police chief to the principal to the priest, marbled red eyes and big grins all around. The children, however, do not seem to have all that much fun, with frowns comparable to those of the Amazon workers in the Fulfillment Center at the beginning of the two episodes. Perhaps they realize that they, too, have been instrumentalized to further the brand name recognition of commercial

businesses. The second and third verses of the song that plays during the bike parade go:

We don't need nothing from big corporations  
 We don't need progress or fancy educations  
 Maybe our 'tegridy keeps us down  
 But that's life livin' in our Colorado town.

Now we gotta learn to live without boxes every day  
 We might wake up tomorrow and wonder why they went away  
 Guess you might call us a bunch of white trash hicks  
 But at least we ain't suckin' no Bezosian dicks.

Then, last shot, a commercial message: "Tegridy Weed. Coming soon to a giant online retailer near you." At least from the point of view of South Park's adults, the image of the worker has come full circle back to how it was portrayed in earlier *South Park* episodes: a bunch of "white trash hicks" with no desire for "progress" or education. Still, this is not necessarily the final image impressed upon the viewer. There are no Confederate flags, no one is yelling "They took our job!" What is more, the viewer has not forgotten Josh, has not forgotten his lessons on socialism and his—for the most part—earnest portrayal by *South Park*. On the one hand, *South Park* seems to imply that, in many aspects, Marx and Engels's analyses still apply to today, particularly with respect to alienation, corporate control, and ownership of the means of production. In order to illustrate this, the creators evoke the great American labor struggles of the past. At the same time, they criticize the way liberals (and other factions of regular consumer-workers) sell out to Corporate America and their self-deception in believing that everything is alright with capitalism as long as it is still possible to orchestrate publicity stunts opposing the biggest and most visible corporations. In other words, *South Park* criticizes the self-congratulatory moral position of, figuratively speaking, buying at Whole Foods yet rejecting Amazon. (Note: this episode was aired before Whole Foods was purchased by Amazon, rendering the distinction between the two somewhat moot.)

Perhaps Anarchism is the Answer

There is, however, another complication that might be worth considering. Marxian (and then Marxist) theory has always placed the greatest emphasis on labor with all of its ramifications, and this has laid the

foundations of both communist and socialist ideology to the point where today, like in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the terms “communism” and “socialism” are often used interchangeably in the U.S., though these days mainly by the political right in order to evoke the specter of Stalinism any time vaguely socialist ideas enter the public conversation. However, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was another faction active in the same struggles, oftentimes alongside the communists and socialists: the anarchists. Many of the Haymarket organizers—and all of those who were sentenced to death for their involvement—were self-proclaimed anarchists.

In *Anarchy—In a Manner of Speaking*, David Graeber writes:

if you look at the very early 20th century in countries like Spain or Italy, where half the labor unions were anarchist and half were socialist, the biggest difference was that the socialist demands always focused on more wages and the anarchist, on less hours. One was saying “We want a consumer society for everyone” [...]; the other wanted out of the system entirely. (17)

Anarchists have always had an international outlook, and while they never fought globalization as such, they often took a stand against globalization of both capital and capitalism as is exemplified by their involvement in Seattle’s 1999 Anti-WTO protests. Today, Amazon is among the most publicly visible manifestations of the globalization of capital. As quasi-libertarians (free markets, legalization of drugs, pro-gay marriage etc.)—though they profess to be somewhat uncomfortable with that label—the makers of *South Park* would naturally feel more drawn to the laissez-faire aspects of anarchism than to socialism, and as people who attended an Academy Awards ceremony after taking LSD (Grigoriadis), they might also feel more drawn to a “turn on, tune in, drop out” approach or a reduction of work hours than to Protestant work ethics or a communist “sanctification of work” (Kacem in Graeber 18). In this reading, the “perhaps” of Josh’s “Perhaps socialism is the answer” can be read quite literally and not as a rhetorical device: perhaps, but perhaps it is anarchism that is the answer.

While I do not feel the success of driving Amazon out of town should necessarily have been attributed to Marx and Engels, attributing it to capitalist Tegridy Weed does feel a bit flawed, too. Nevertheless, with the available cast of characters, getting the whole town high may have been the decisive move Stone and Parker needed to bring the two episodes to a humorous conclusion while adhering more closely to their personal political beliefs and paying tribute, for the first time, to the history of socialist and anarchist workers marching side by side against the common enemy of the robber baron. The question remains as to whether this

depiction represents a fundamental ideological shift or whether, as suggested by the season finale's last song, Stone and Parker will ultimately revert to their former practice of largely disregarding labor issues and depicting workers as white trash hicks.

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