

THE SIMPSONS

Atomistic Politics and the Nuclear Family

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WHEN SENATOR CHARLES SCHUMER (D-N.Y.) visited a high school in upstate New York in May 1999, he received an unexpected civics lesson from an unexpected source. Speaking on the timely subject of school violence, Senator Schumer praised the Brady Bill, which he helped sponsor, for its role in preventing crime. Rising to question the effectiveness of this effort at gun control, a student named Kevin Davis cited an example no doubt familiar to his classmates but unknown to the senator from New York:

It reminds me of a *Simpsons* episode. Homer wanted to get a gun but he had been in jail twice and in a mental institution. They label him as "potentially dangerous." So Homer asks what that means and the gun dealer says: "It just means you need an extra week before you can get the gun."¹

Without going into the pros and cons of gun control legislation, one can recognize in this incident how the Fox Network's cartoon series *The Simpsons* shapes the way Americans think, particularly the younger generation. It may therefore be worthwhile taking a look at the television program to see what sort of political lessons it is teaching. *The Simpsons* may seem like mindless entertainment to many, but in fact, it offers some of the most sophisticated comedy and satire ever to appear on American television. Over the years, the show has taken on many serious issues: nuclear power safety, environmentalism, immigration, gay rights, women in the military, and so on. Paradoxically, it is the farcical nature of the show that allows it to be serious in ways that many other television shows are not.²

I will not, however, dwell on the question of the show's politics in the narrowly partisan sense. *The Simpsons* satirizes both Republicans and Demo-

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crats. The local politician who appears most frequently in the show, Mayor Quimby, speaks with a heavy Kennedy accent³ and generally acts like a Democratic urban-machine politician. By the same token, the most sinister political force in the series, the cabal that seems to run the town of Springfield from behind the scenes, is invariably portrayed as Republican. On balance, it is fair to say that *The Simpsons*, like most of what comes out of Hollywood, is pro-Democrat and anti-Republican. One whole episode was a gratuitously vicious portrait of ex-President Bush,⁴ whereas the show has been surprisingly slow to satirize President Clinton.⁵ Nevertheless, perhaps the single funniest political line in the history of *The Simpsons* came at the expense of the Democrats. When Grandpa Abraham Simpson receives money in the mail really meant for his grandchildren, Bart asks him, "Didn't you wonder why you were getting checks for absolutely nothing?" Abe replies, "I figured 'cause the Democrats were in power again."⁶ Unwilling to forego any opportunity for humor, the show's creators have been generally evenhanded over the years in making fun of both parties, and of both the Right and the Left.⁷

Setting aside the surface issue of political partisanship, I am interested in the deep politics of *The Simpsons*, what the show most fundamentally suggests about political life in the United States. The show broaches the question of politics through the question of the family, and this in itself is a political statement. By dealing centrally with the family, *The Simpsons* takes up real human issues everybody can recognize and thus ends up in many respects less "cartoonish" than other television programs. Its cartoon characters are more human, more fully rounded, than the supposedly real human beings in many situation comedies. Above all, the show has created a believable human community: Springfield, USA. *The Simpsons* shows the family as part of a larger community and in effect affirms the kind of community that can sustain the family. That is at one and the same time the secret of the show's popularity with the American public and the most interesting political statement it has to make.

The Simpsons indeed offers one of the most important images of the family in contemporary American culture and, in particular, an image of the nuclear family. With the names taken from creator Matt Groening's own childhood home, *The Simpsons* portrays the average American family: father (Homer), mother (Marge), and 2.2 children (Bart, Lisa, and little Maggie). Many commentators have lamented the fact that *The Simpsons* now serves as one of the representative images of American family life, claiming that the show provides horrible role models for parents and children. The popularity of the show is often cited as evidence of the decline of family values in the United States. But critics of *The Simpsons* need to take a closer look at the show and view it in the context of television history. For all its slapstick

nature and its mocking of certain aspects of family life, *The Simpsons* has an affirmative side and ends up celebrating the nuclear family as an institution. For television, this is no minor achievement. For decades, American television has tended to downplay the importance of the nuclear family and offer various one-parent families or other nontraditional arrangements as alternatives to it. The one-parent situation comedy actually dates back almost to the beginning of network television, at least as early as *My Little Margie* (1952-1955). But the classic one-parent situation comedies, like *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-1968) or *My Three Sons* (1960-1972), generally found ways to reconstitute the nuclear family in one form or another (often through the presence of an aunt or uncle) and thus still presented it as the norm (sometimes the story line actually moved in the direction of the widower getting remarried, as happened to Steve Douglas, the Fred MacMurray character, in *My Three Sons*).

But starting with shows in the 1970s like *Alice* (1976-1985), American television genuinely began to move away from the nuclear family as the norm and suggest that other patterns of child rearing might be equally valid or perhaps even superior. Television in the 1980s and 1990s experimented with all sorts of permutations on the theme of the nonnuclear family, in shows such as *Love, Sidney* (1981-1983), *Punky Brewster* (1984-1986), and *My Two Dads* (1987-1990). This development partly resulted from the standard Hollywood procedure of generating new series by simply varying successful formulas.⁸ But the trend toward nonnuclear families also expressed the ideological bent of Hollywood and its impulse to call traditional family values into question. Above all, though television shows usually traced the absence of one or more parents to deaths in the family, the trend away from the nuclear family obviously reflected the reality of divorce in American life (and especially in Hollywood). Wanting to be progressive, television producers set out to endorse contemporary social trends away from the stable, traditional, nuclear family. With the typical momentum of the entertainment industry, Hollywood eventually took this development to its logical conclusion: the no-parent family. Another popular Fox program, *Party of Five* (1994-), now shows a family of children gallantly raising themselves after both their parents were killed in an automobile accident.

Party of Five cleverly conveys a message some television producers evidently think their contemporary audience wants to hear—that children can do quite well without one parent and preferably without both. The children in the audience want to hear this message because it flatters their sense of independence. The parents want to hear this message because it soothes their sense of guilt, either about abandoning their children completely (as sometimes happens in cases of divorce) or just not devoting enough “quality time” to them.

Absent or negligent parents can console themselves with the thought that their children really are better off without them, “just like those cool—and incredibly good-looking—kids on *Party of Five*.” In short, for roughly the past two decades, much of American television has been suggesting that the breakdown of the American family does not constitute a social crisis or even a serious problem. In fact, it should be regarded as a form of liberation from an image of the family that may have been good enough for the 1950s but is no longer valid in the 1990s. It is against this historical background that the statement *The Simpsons* has to make about the nuclear family has to be appreciated.

Of course television never completely abandoned the nuclear family, even in the 1980s, as shown by the success of such shows as *All in the Family* (1971-1983), *Family Ties* (1982-1989), and *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992). And when *The Simpsons* debuted as a regular series in 1989, it was by no means unique in its reaffirmation of the value of the nuclear family. Several other shows took the same path in the past decade, reflecting larger social and political trends in society, in particular the reassertion of family values that has by now been adopted as a program by both political parties in the United States. Fox’s own *Married with Children* (1987-1998) preceded *The Simpsons* in portraying an amusingly dysfunctional nuclear family. Another interesting portrayal of the nuclear family can be found in ABC’s *Home Improvement* (1991-1999), which tries to recuperate traditional family values and even gender roles within a postmodern television context. But *The Simpsons* is in many respects the most interesting example of this return to the nuclear family. Though it strikes many people as trying to subvert the American family or to undermine its authority, in fact, it reminds us that antiauthoritarianism is itself an American tradition and that family authority has always been problematic in democratic America. What makes *The Simpsons* so interesting is the way it combines traditionalism with antitraditionalism. It continually makes fun of the traditional American family. But it continually offers an enduring image of the nuclear family in the very act of satirizing it. Many of the traditional values of the American family survive this satire, above all the value of the nuclear family itself.

As I have suggested, one can understand this point partly in terms of television history. *The Simpsons* is a hip, postmodern, self-aware show.⁹ But its self-awareness focuses on the traditional representation of the American family on television. It therefore presents the paradox of an untraditional show that is deeply rooted in television tradition. *The Simpsons* can be traced back to earlier television cartoons that dealt with families, such as *The Flintstones* or *The Jetsons*. But these cartoons must themselves be traced back to the famous nuclear-family sitcoms of the 1950s: *I Love Lucy*, *The Adventures*

of *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best*, and *Leave It to Beaver*. *The Simpsons* is a postmodern re-creation of the first generation of family sitcoms on television. Looking back on those shows, we easily see the transformations and discontinuities *The Simpsons* has brought about. In *The Simpsons*, father emphatically does not know best. And it clearly is more dangerous to leave it to Bart than to Beaver. Obviously, *The Simpsons* does not offer a simple return to the family shows of the 1950s. But even in the act of re-creation and transformation, the show provides elements of continuity that make *The Simpsons* more traditional than may at first appear.

The Simpsons has indeed found its own odd way to defend the nuclear family. In effect, the shows says, "Take the worst-case scenario—the Simpsons—and even that family is better than no family." In fact, the Simpson family is not all that bad. Some people are appalled at the idea of young boys imitating Bart, in particular his disrespect for authority and especially for his teachers. These critics of *The Simpsons* forget that Bart's rebelliousness conforms to a venerable American archetype and that this country was founded on disrespect for authority and an act of rebellion. Bart is an American icon, an updated version of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn rolled into one. For all his troublemaking—precisely because of his troublemaking—Bart behaves just the way a young boy is supposed to in American mythology, from *Dennis the Menace* comics to the *Our Gang* comedies.¹⁰

As for the mother and daughter in *The Simpsons*, Marge and Lisa are not bad role models at all. Marge Simpson is very much the devoted mother and housekeeper; she also often displays a feminist streak, particularly in the episode in which she goes off on a jaunt à la *Thelma and Louise*.¹¹ Indeed, she is very modern in her attempts to combine certain feminist impulses with the traditional role of a mother. Lisa is in many ways the ideal child in contemporary terms. She is an overachiever in school, and as a feminist, a vegetarian, and an environmentalist, she is politically correct across the spectrum.

The real issue, then, is Homer. Many people have criticized *The Simpsons* for its portrayal of the father as dumb, uneducated, weak in character, and morally unprincipled. Homer is all those things, but at least he is there. He fulfills the bare minimum of a father: he is present for his wife and above all his children. To be sure, he lacks many of the qualities we would like to see in the ideal father. He is selfish, often putting his own interest above that of his family. As we learn in one of the Halloween episodes, Homer would sell his soul to the devil for a donut (though fortunately it turns out that Marge already owned his soul and therefore it was not Homer's to sell).¹² Homer is undeniably crass, vulgar, and incapable of appreciating the finer things in life. He has a hard time sharing interests with Lisa, except when she develops a remarkable knack for predicting the outcome of pro football games and allows her

father to become a big winner in the betting pool at Moe's Tavern.¹³ Moreover, Homer gets angry easily and takes his anger out on his children, as his many attempts to strangle Bart attest.

In all these respects, Homer fails as a father. But upon reflection, it is surprising to realize how many decent qualities he has. First and foremost, he is attached to his own—he loves his family because it is his. His motto basically is, “My family, right or wrong.” This is hardly a philosophic position, but it may well provide the bedrock of the family as an institution, which is why Plato's *Republic* must subvert the power of the family. Homer Simpson is the opposite of a philosopher-king; he is devoted not to what is best but to what is his own. That position has its problems, but it does help explain how the seemingly dysfunctional Simpson family manages to function.

For example, Homer is willing to work to support his family, even in the dangerous job of nuclear power plant safety supervisor, a job made all the more dangerous by the fact that he is the one doing it. In the episode in which Lisa comes to want a pony desperately, Homer even takes a second job working for Apu Nahasapeemapetilon at the Kwik-E-Mart to earn the money for the pony's upkeep and nearly kills himself in the process.¹⁴ In such actions, Homer manifests his genuine concern for his family, and as he repeatedly proves, he will defend them if necessary, sometimes at great personal risk. Often, Homer is not effective in such actions, but that makes his devotion to his family in some ways all the more touching. Homer is the distillation of pure fatherhood. Take away all the qualities that make for a genuinely good father—wisdom, compassion, even temper, selflessness—and what you have left is Homer Simpson with his pure, mindless, dogged devotion to his family. That is why for all his stupidity, bigotry, and self-centered quality, we cannot hate Homer. He continually fails at being a good father, but he never gives up trying, and in some basic and important sense that makes him a good father.

The most effective defense of the family in the series comes in the episode in which the Simpsons are actually broken up as a unit.¹⁵ This episode pointedly begins with an image of Marge as a good mother, preparing breakfast and school lunches simultaneously for her children. She even gives Bart and Lisa careful instructions about their sandwiches: “Keep the lettuce separate until 11:30.” But after this promising parental beginning, a series of mishaps occurs. Homer and Marge go off to the Mingled Waters Health Spa for a well-deserved afternoon of relaxation. In their haste, they leave their house dirty, especially a pile of unwashed dishes in the kitchen sink. Meanwhile, things are unfortunately not going well for the children at school. Bart has accidentally picked up lice from the monkey of his best friend Milhouse, prompting Principal Skinner to ask, “What kind of parents would permit such a lapse in scalp hygiene?” The evidence against the Simpson parents

mounts when Skinner sends for Bart's sister. With her prescription shoes stolen by her classmates and her feet accordingly covered with mud, Lisa looks like some street urchin straight out of Dickens.

Faced with all this evidence of parental neglect, the horrified principal alerts the Child Welfare Board, who are themselves shocked when they take Bart and Lisa home and explore the premises. The officials completely misinterpret the situation. Confronted by a pile of old newspapers, they assume that Marge is a bad housekeeper, when in fact she had assembled the documents to help Lisa with a history project. Jumping to conclusions, the bureaucrats decide that Marge and Homer are unfit parents and lodge specific charges that the Simpson household is a "squalid hellhole and the toilet paper is hung in improper overhand fashion." The authorities determine that the Simpson children must be given to foster parents. Bart, Lisa, and Maggie are accordingly handed over to the family next door, presided over by the patriarchal Ned Flanders. Throughout the series, the Flanders family serves as the doppelgänger of the Simpsons. Flanders and his brood are in fact the perfect family according to old-style morality and religion. In marked contrast to Bart, the Flanders boys, Rod and Todd, are well behaved and obedient. Above all, the Flanders family is pious, devoted to activities like Bible reading, and more zealous than even the local Reverend Lovejoy. When Ned offers to play "bombardment" with Bart and Lisa, what he has in mind is bombardment with questions about the Bible. The Flanders family is shocked to learn that their neighbors do not know of the serpent of Rehoboam, not to mention the Well of Zahassadar or the bridal feast of Beth Chadruharazzeb.

Exploring the question of whether the Simpson family really is dysfunctional, the foster parent episode offers two alternatives to it: on one hand, the old-style moral/religious family; on the other, the therapeutic state, what is often now called the nanny state. Who is best able to raise the Simpson children? The civil authorities intervene, claiming that Homer and Marge are unfit as parents. They must be reeducated and are sent off to a "family skills class" based on the premise that experts know better how to raise children. Child rearing is a matter of a certain kind of expertise, which can be taught. This is the modern answer: the family is inadequate as an institution and hence the state must intervene to make it function. At the same time, the episode offers the old-style moral/religious answer: what children need is God-fearing parents in order to make them God-fearing themselves. Indeed, Ned Flanders does everything he can to get Bart and Lisa to reform and behave with the piety of his own children.

But the answer the show offers is that the Simpson children are better off with their real parents—not because they are more intelligent or learned in child rearing, and not because they are superior in morality or piety, but sim-

ply because Homer and Marge are the people most genuinely attached to Bart, Lisa, and Maggie, since the children are their own offspring. The episode works particularly well to show the horror of the supposedly omniscient and omnicompetent state intruding in every aspect of family life. When Homer desperately tries to call up Bart and Lisa, he hears the official message: “The number you have dialed can no longer be reached from this phone, you negligent monster.”

At the same time, we see the defects of the old-style religion. The Flanders may be righteous as parents but they are also self-righteous. Mrs. Flanders says, “I don’t judge Homer and Marge; that’s for a vengeful God to do.” Ned’s piety is so extreme that he eventually exasperates even Reverend Lovejoy, who at one point asks him, “Have you thought of one of the other major religions? They’re all pretty much the same.”

In the end, Bart, Lisa, and Maggie are joyously reunited with Homer and Marge. Despite charges of being dysfunctional, the Simpson family functions quite well because the children are attached to their parents and the parents are attached to their children. The premise of those who tried to take the Simpson children away is that there is a principle external to the family by which it can be judged dysfunctional, whether the principle of contemporary child-rearing theories or that of the old-style religion. The foster parent episode suggests the contrary—that the family contains its own principle of legitimacy. The family knows best. This episode thus illustrates the strange combination of traditionalism and antitraditionalism in *The Simpsons*. Even as the show rejects the idea of a simple return to the traditional moral/religious idea of the family, it refuses to accept contemporary statist attempts to subvert the family completely and reasserts the enduring value of the family as an institution.

As the importance of Ned Flanders in this episode reminds us, another way in which the show is unusual is that religion plays a significant role in *The Simpsons*. Religion is a regular part of the life of the Simpson family. We often see them going to church, and several episodes revolve around churchgoing, including one in which God even speaks directly to Homer.¹⁶ Moreover, religion is a regular part of life in general in Springfield. In addition to Ned Flanders, the Reverend Lovejoy is featured in several episodes, including one in which no less than Meryl Streep provides the voice for his daughter.¹⁷

This attention to religion is atypical of American television in the 1990s. Indeed, judging by most television programs today, one would never guess that Americans are by and large a religious and even a churchgoing people. Television generally acts as if religion played little or no role in the daily lives of Americans, even though the evidence points to exactly the opposite con-

clusion. Many reasons have been offered to explain why television generally avoids the subject of religion. Producers are afraid that if they raise religious issues, they will offend orthodox viewers and soon be embroiled in controversy; television executives are particularly worried about having the sponsors of their shows boycotted by powerful religious groups. Moreover, the television community itself is largely secular in its outlook and thus generally uninterested in religious questions. Indeed, much of Hollywood is often outright antireligious, and especially opposed to anything labeled religious fundamentalism (and it tends to label anything to the right of Unitarianism as “religious fundamentalism”).

Religion has, however, been making a comeback on television in the past decade, in part because producers have discovered that an audience niche exists for shows like *Touched by an Angel* (1994-).¹⁸ Still, the entertainment community has a hard time understanding what religion really means to the American public, and it especially cannot deal with the idea that religion could be an everyday, normal part of American life. Religious figures in both movies and television tend to be miraculously good and pure or monstrously evil and hypocritical. While there are exceptions to this rule,¹⁹ generally Hollywood religious figures must be either saints or sinners, either laboring against all odds and all reason for good or religious fanatics, full of bigotry, warped by sexual repression, laboring to destroy innocent lives in one way or another.²⁰

But *The Simpsons* accepts religion as a normal part of life in Springfield, USA. If the show makes fun of piety in the person of Ned Flanders, in Homer Simpson it also suggests that one can go to church and not be either a religious fanatic or a saint. One episode devoted to Reverend Lovejoy deals realistically and rather sympathetically with the problem of pastoral burnout.²¹ The overburdened minister has just listened to too many problems from his parishioners and has to turn the job over to Marge Simpson as the “listen lady.” The treatment of religion in *The Simpsons* is parallel to and connected with its treatment of the family. *The Simpsons* is not proreligion—it is too hip, cynical, and iconoclastic for that. Indeed, on the surface, the show appears to be antireligious, with a good deal of its satire directed against Ned Flanders and other pious characters. But once again, we see the principle at work that when *The Simpsons* satirizes something, it acknowledges its importance. Even when it seems to be ridiculing religion, it recognizes, as few other television shows do, the genuine role that religion plays in American life.

It is here that the treatment of the family in *The Simpsons* links up with its treatment of politics. Although the show focuses on the nuclear family, it relates the family to larger institutions in American life, like the church, the school, and even political institutions themselves, like city government. In all

these cases, *The Simpsons* satirizes these institutions, making them look laughable and often even hollow. But at the same time, the show acknowledges their importance and especially their importance for the family. Over the past few decades, television has increasingly tended to isolate the family—to show it largely removed from any larger institutional framework or context. This is another trend to which *The Simpsons* runs counter, partly as a result of its being a postmodern re-creation of 1950s sitcoms. Shows like *Father Knows Best* or *Leave It to Beaver* tended to be set in small-town America, with all the intricate web of institutions into which family life was woven. In re-creating this world, even while mocking it, *The Simpsons* cannot help re-creating its ambience and even at times its ethos.

Springfield is decidedly an American small town. In several episodes, it is contrasted with Capitol City, a metropolis the Simpsons approach with fear and trepidation. Obviously, the show makes fun of small-town life—it makes fun of everything—but it simultaneously celebrates the virtues of the traditional American small town. One of the principal reasons why the dysfunctional Simpsons family functions as well as it does is that they live in a traditional American small town. The institutions that govern their lives are not remote from them or alien to them. The Simpson children go to a neighborhood school (though they are bussed to it by the ex-hippie driver Otto). Their friends in school are largely the same as their friends in their neighborhood. The Simpsons are not confronted by an elaborate, unapproachable, and uncaring educational bureaucracy. Principal Skinner and Mrs. Krabappel may not be perfect educators, but when Homer and Marge need to talk to them, they are readily accessible. The same is true of the Springfield police force. Chief Wiggum is not a great crime fighter, but he is well known to the citizens of Springfield, as they are to him. The police in Springfield still have neighborhood beats and have even been known to share a donut or two with Homer.

Similarly, politics in Springfield is largely a local matter, including town meetings in which the citizens of Springfield get to influence decisions on important matters of local concern, such as whether gambling should be legalized or a monorail built. As his Kennedy accent suggests, Mayor Quimby is a demagogue, but at least he is Springfield's own demagogue. When he buys votes, he buys them directly from the citizens of Springfield. If Quimby wants Grandpa Simpson to support a freeway he wishes to build through town, he must name the road after Abe's favorite television character, Matlock. Everywhere one looks in Springfield, one sees a surprising degree of local control and autonomy. The nuclear power plant is a source of pollution and constant danger, but at least it is locally owned by Springfield's own slave-driving industrial tyrant and tycoon, Montgomery Burns, and not

by some remote multinational corporation (indeed, in an exception that proves the rule, when the plant is sold to German investors, Burns soon buys it back to restore his ego).²²

In sum, for all its postmodern hipness, *The Simpsons* is profoundly anachronistic in the way it harks back to an earlier age when Americans felt more in contact with their governing institutions and family life was solidly anchored in a larger but still local community. The federal government rarely makes its presence felt in *The Simpsons*, and when it does it generally takes a quirky form like former President Bush moving next door to Homer, an arrangement that does not work out. The long tentacles of the IRS have occasionally crept their way into Springfield, but its stranglehold on America is of course all-pervasive and inescapable.²³ Generally speaking, government is much more likely to take local forms in the show. When sinister forces from the Republican Party conspire to unseat Mayor Quimby by running ex-convict Sideshow Bob against him, it is local sinister forces who do the conspiring, led by Mr. Burns and including Rainer Wolfcastle (the Arnold Schwarzenegger look-alike who plays McBain in the movies) and a Rush Limbaugh lookalike named Burch Barlow.²⁴

Here is one respect in which the portrayal of the local community in *The Simpsons* is unrealistic. In Springfield, even the media forces are local. There is of course nothing strange about having a local television station in Springfield. It is perfectly plausible that the Simpsons get their news from a man, Kent Brockman, who actually lives in their midst. It is also quite believable that the kiddie show on Springfield television is local, and that its host, Krusty the Klown, not only lives in town but also is available for local functions like supermarket openings and birthday parties. But what are authentic movie stars like Rainer Wolfcastle doing living in Springfield? And what about the fact that the world-famous *Itchy & Scratchy* cartoons are produced in Springfield? Indeed, the entire *Itchy & Scratchy* empire is apparently headquartered in Springfield. This is not a trivial fact. It means that when Marge campaigns against cartoon violence, she can picket *Itchy & Scratchy* headquarters without leaving her hometown.²⁵ The citizens of Springfield are fortunate to be able to have a direct impact on the forces that shape their lives and especially their family lives. In short, *The Simpsons* takes the phenomenon that has in fact done more than anything else to subvert the power of the local in American politics and American life in general—namely, the media—and in effect brings it within the orbit of Springfield, thereby placing the force at least partially under local control.²⁶

The unrealistic portrayal of the media as local helps highlight the overall tendency of *The Simpsons* to present Springfield as a kind of classical polis; it is just about as self-contained and autonomous as a community can be in the

modern world. This once again reflects the postmodern nostalgia of *The Simpsons*; with its self-conscious re-creation of the 1950s sitcom, it ends up weirdly celebrating the old ideal of small-town America.²⁷ Again, I do not mean to deny that the first impulse of *The Simpsons* is to make fun of small-town life. But in that very process, it reminds us of what the old ideal was and what was so attractive about it, above all the fact that average Americans somehow felt in touch with the forces that influenced their lives and maybe even in control of them. In a presentation before the American Society of Newspaper Editors on April 12, 1991 (broadcast on C-SPAN), Matt Groening said that the subtext of *The Simpsons* is “the people in power don’t always have your best interests in mind.”²⁸ This is a view of politics that cuts across the normal distinctions between Left and Right and explains why the show can be relatively evenhanded in its treatment of both political parties and has something to offer to both liberals and conservatives. *The Simpsons* is based on distrust of power and especially of power remote from ordinary people. The show celebrates genuine community, a community in which everybody more or less knows everybody else (even if they do not necessarily like each other). By re-creating this older sense of community, the show manages to generate a kind of warmth out of its postmodern coolness, a warmth that is largely responsible for its success with the American public. This view of community may be the most profound comment *The Simpsons* has to make on family life in particular and politics in general in America today. No matter how dysfunctional it may seem, the nuclear family is an institution worth preserving. And the way to preserve it is not by the offices of a distant, supposedly expert, therapeutic state but by restoring its links to a series of local institutions that reflect and foster the same principle that makes the Simpson family itself work—the attachment to one’s own, the principle that we best care for something when it belongs to us.

The celebration of the local in *The Simpsons* was confirmed in an episode that aired May 9, 1999, which for once explored in detail the possibility of a utopian alternative to politics as usual in Springfield. The episode begins with Lisa disgusted by a gross-out contest sponsored by a local radio station, which, among other things, results in the burning of a travelling van Gogh exhibition. With the indignation typical of youth, Lisa fires off an angry letter to the Springfield newspaper, charging, “Today our town lost what remained of its fragile civility.” Outraged by the cultural limitations of Springfield, Lisa complains, “We have eight malls, but no symphony; thirty-two bars but no alternative theater.” Lisa’s spirited outburst catches the attention of the local chapter of Mensa, and the few high-IQ citizens of Springfield (including Dr. Hibbert, Principal Skinner, the Comic Book Guy, and Professor Frink) invite her to join the organization (once they have determined that she has brought a

pie and not a quiche to their meeting). Inspired by Lisa's courageous speaking out against the cultural parochialism of Springfield, Dr. Hibbert challenges the city's way of life: "Why do we live in a town where the smartest have no power and the stupidest run everything?" Forming "a council of learned citizens," or what reporter Kent Brockman later refers to as an "intellectual junta," the Mensa members set out to create the cartoon equivalent of Plato's *Republic* in Springfield. Naturally, they begin by ousting Mayor Quimby, who in fact leaves town rather abruptly once the little matter of some missing lottery funds comes up.

Taking advantage of an obscure provision in the Springfield charter, the Mensa members step into the power vacuum created by Quimby's sudden abdication. Lisa sees no limit to what the Platonic rule of the wise might accomplish: "With our superior intellects, we could rebuild this city on a foundation of reason and enlightenment; we could turn Springfield into a utopia." Principal Skinner holds out hope for "a new Athens," while another Mensa member thinks in terms of B. F. Skinner's "Walden II." The new rulers immediately set out to bring their utopia into existence, redesigning traffic patterns and abolishing all sports that involve violence. But in a variant of the dialectic of enlightenment, the abstract rationality and benevolent universalism of the intellectual junta soon prove to be a fraud. The Mensa members begin to disagree among themselves, and it becomes evident that their claim to represent the public interest masks a number of private agendas. At the climax of the episode, the Comic Book Guy comes forward to proclaim, "Inspired by the most logical race in the galaxy, the Vulcans, breeding will be permitted once every seven years; for many of you this will mean much less breeding; for me, much much more." This reference to *Star Trek* appropriately elicits from Groundskeeper Willie a response in his native accent that calls to mind the Enterprise's Chief Engineer Scotty: "You cannot do that, sir, you don't have the power." The Mensa regime's self-interested attempt to imitate the *Republic* by regulating breeding in the city is just too much for the ordinary citizens of Springfield to bear.

With the Platonic revolution in Springfield degenerating into petty squabbling and violence, a *deus ex machina* arrives in the form of physicist Stephen Hawking, proclaimed as "the world's smartest man." When Hawking voices his disappointment with the Mensa regime, he ends up in a fight with Principal Skinner. Seizing the opportunity created by the division among the intelligentsia, Homer leads a counterrevolution of the stupid with the rallying cry: "C'mon you idiots, we're taking back this town." Thus, the attempt to bring about a rule of philosopher-kings in Springfield ends ignominiously, leaving Hawking to pronounce its epitaph: "Sometimes the smartest of us can be the most childish." Theory fails when translated into practice in this episode of

The Simpsons and must be relegated once more to the confines of the contemplative life. The episode ends with Hawking and Homer drinking beer together in Moe's Tavern and discussing Homer's theory of a donut-shaped universe.

The utopia episode offers an epitome of what *The Simpsons* does so well. It can be enjoyed on two levels—as both broad farce and intellectual satire. The episode contains some of the grossest humor in the long history of *The Simpsons* (I have not even mentioned the subplot concerning Homer's encounter with a pornographic photographer). But at the same time, it is filled with subtle cultural allusions; for example, the Mensa members convene in what is obviously a Frank Lloyd Wright prairie house. In the end, then, the utopia episode embodies the strange mixture of intellectualism and anti-intellectualism characteristic of *The Simpsons*. In Lisa's challenge to Springfield, the show calls attention to the cultural limitations of small-town America, but it also reminds us that intellectual disdain for the common man can be carried too far and that theory can all too easily lose touch with common sense. Ultimately, *The Simpsons* seems to offer a kind of intellectual defense of the common man against intellectuals, which helps explain its popularity and broad appeal. Very few people have found *The Critique of Pure Reason* funny, but in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche felt that he had put his finger on Kant's joke:

Kant wanted to prove in a way that would puzzle all the world that all the world was right—that was the private joke of this soul. He wrote against the learned on behalf of the prejudice of the common people, but for the learned and not for the common people.²⁹

In Nietzsche's terms, *The Simpsons* goes *The Critique of Pure Reason* one better: it defends the common man against the intellectual but in a way that both the common man and the intellectual can understand and enjoy.

NOTES

1. As reported in Ed Henry's "Heard on the Hill" column in *Roll Call*, 44, no. 81 (May 13, 1999). His source was the *Albany Times-Union*.

2. This essay is a substantial revision of a paper originally delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association in Boston, September 1998. All *Simpsons* episodes are cited by title, number, and original broadcast date, using the information supplied in the invaluable reference work *The Simpsons: A Complete Guide to Our Favorite Family*, ed. Ray Richmond and Antonia Coffman (New York: HarperCollins, 1997). I cite episodes that aired subsequent to the publication of this book simply by broadcast date.

3. The identification is made complete when Quimby says, "Ich bin ein Springfielder" in "Burns Verkaufen der Kraftwerk," #8F09, 12/5/91.

4. "Two Bad Neighbors," #3F09, 1/14/96.

5. For the reluctance to go after Clinton, see the rather tame satire of the 1996 presidential campaign in the "Citizen Kang" segment of the Halloween episode, "Treehouse of Horror VII," #4F02, 10/27/96. Finally in the 1998-1999 season, faced with the mounting scandals in the Clinton administration, the creators of *The Simpsons* decided to take off the kid gloves in their treatment of the president, especially in the February 7, 1999, episode (in which Homer legally changes his name to Max Power). Husted by Clinton at a party, Marge Simpson is forced to ask, "Are you sure it's a federal law that I have to dance with you?" Reassuring Marge that she is good enough for a man of his stature, Clinton tells her, "Hell, I've done it with pigs—real no foolin' pigs."

6. "The Front," #9616, 4/15/93.

7. An amusing debate developed in the *Wall Street Journal* over the politics of *The Simpsons*. It began with an Op-Ed piece by Benjamin Stein titled "TV Land: From Mao to Dow" (February 5, 1997), in which he argued that the show has no politics. This piece was answered by a letter from John McGrew given the title "The Simpsons Bash Familiar Values" (March 19, 1997), in which he argued that the show is political and consistently left-wing. On March 12, 1997, letters by Deroy Murdock and H. B. Johnson Jr. argued that the show attacks left-wing targets as well and often supports traditional values. Johnson's conclusion that the show is "politically ambiguous" and thus appeals "to conservatives as well as to liberals" is supported by the evidence of this debate itself.

8. Perhaps the most famous example is the creation of *Green Acres* (1965-1971) by inverting *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971)—if a family of hicks moving from the country to the city was funny, television executives concluded that a couple of sophisticates moving from the city to the country should be a hit as well. And it was.

9. On the self-reflexive character of *The Simpsons*, see my essay "The Greatest TV Show Ever," *American Enterprise*, 8, no. 5 (September/October 1997), 34-37.

10. Oddly enough, Bart's creator, Matt Groening, has now joined the chorus condemning the Simpson boy. Earlier this year, a wire-service report quoted Groening as saying to those who call Bart a bad role model, "I now have a 7-year-old boy and a 9-year-old boy so all I can say is I apologize. Now I know what you were talking about."

11. "Marge on the Lam," #1F03, 11/4/93.

12. "The Devil and Homer Simpson" in "Treehouse of Horror IV," #1F04, 10/30/93.

13. "Lisa the Greek," #8F12, 1/23/92.

14. "Lisa's Pony," #8F06, 11/7/91.

15. "Home Sweet Homediddly-Dum-Doodily," #3F01, 10/1/95.

16. "Homer the Heretic," #9F01, 10/8/92.

17. "Bart's Girlfriend," #2F04, 11/6/94.

18. I would like to comment on this show, but it is scheduled at the same time as *The Simpsons*, and I have never seen it.

19. Consider, for example, the minister played by Tom Skerritt in Robert Redford's film of Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It*.

20. A good example of this stereotyping can be found in the film *Contact*, with its contrasting religious figures played by Matthew McConaughey (good) and Jake Busey (evil).

21. "In Marge We Trust," #4F18, 4/27/97.

22. "Burns Verkaufen der Kraftwerk," #8F09, 12/5/91.

23. See, for example, "Bart the Fink," #3F12, 2/11/96.

24. "Sideshow Bob Roberts," #2F02, 10/9/94.

25. "Itchy & Scratchy & Marge," #7F09, 12/20/90.

26. The episode called "Radioactive Man" (#2517, 9/24/95) provides an amusing reversal of the usual relationship between the big-time media and small-town life. A Hollywood film company comes to Springfield to make a movie featuring the comic book hero, Radioactive Man. The Springfield locals take advantage of the naive moviemakers, raising prices all over town and imposing all sorts of new taxes on the film crew. Forced to return to California penniless, the moviemakers are greeted like small-town heroes by their caring neighbors in the Hollywood community.

27. In his review of *The Simpsons: A Complete Guide to Our Favorite Family*, Michael Dirda aptly characterizes the show as "a wickedly funny yet oddly affectionate satire of American life at the end of the 20th century. Imagine the unholy offspring of *Mad* magazine, Mel Brooks's movies, and 'Our Town.'" See the *Washington Post*, Book World, January 11, 1998, p. 5.

28. Oddly enough, this theme is also at the heart of Fox's other great television series, *The X-Files*.

29. See *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, sec. 193 (my translation) in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. 3 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967-1977), 504.

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