

REIFICATION IN SOUTH PARK'S MARGARITAVILLE

A central and underlying concept of most critical social theory is *reification*, a form of alienation in which abstract social entities, especially those relating to capitalist production processes, are presumed to have a power over people and society more generally (Dahms 1998). By paralleling the power of economic forces to religious forces, the "[Margaritaville](http://tinyurl.com/3faq9sc)" episode (<http://tinyurl.com/3faq9sc>) of South Park's thirteenth season illustrates how reification can be generalized to a consumption-based economy. Early in the episode, Stan's father Randy concludes reckless borrowing and spending angered the economy into a great recession. He then leads the town in a movement to stop all spending, as to not further infuriate this "angry and unforgiving" entity. His "dogma" is based on the premise:

The idiots couldn't see that by doing all this frivolous spending they were mocking the economy. And they made the economy very angry. We're all feeling the economy's vengeance because of materialistic heathens who did stupid things with their money!

While the whole town collectively ensures nobody spends money on anything, Stan leads a following of "disciples" with a countermovement arguing: "The economy isn't some vengeful being that takes things away from us. The economy is just made up of people, and people have just lost their faith in it. What people really should be doing is spending more." Towards the end of the episode, Stan gives a "sermon on a mount" that explains how the economy has been reified into a seemingly uncontrollable social force, when in fact it is a human-created institution that we ultimately control as a collective society so long as we collectively trust in that system. He says:

Listen, this is all you need to know: the economy is not a supernatural all-knowing entity. The economy is just an idea, made up by people, thousands of years ago. The economy is not real. And yet, it is real. Nowadays they'll give credit to practically anyone who applies. I applied for this yesterday to prove a point. It is an American Express Platinum card. It has no spending limit. Do not be afraid! This is only plastic. It's just something made up by people. Truly meaningless and still we put our faith in it. Faith is what makes an economy exist. Without faith, it is only plastic cards and paper money.

At the end of the episode, Stan ultimately *proves* his theory true by using his credit card to "forgive" all others' debts; in doing so, the economy recovers, as people, unburdened by their creditors, are free to spend again.

The attached worksheet is used in conjunction with a viewing of this episode. On the worksheet, students assign different quotes from the episode to Lukács' ([1923] 1971) conceptualization of reification through the longstanding subject-object problem in philosophy. Lukács argues an "irrational chasm" developed between people and knowledge, as capitalism alienates the citizenry to think of themselves as passive objectives of history, not subjective creators of the world around them. The worksheet is constructed around this differentiation: asking students to identify whether quotes from the show perceive people as acting subjects in control of an objective economy, or argue people are passive objects, subject to an economy beyond their control.

The After Discussion

A simple “walk-through” of the worksheet enables most students to grasp the concept of *reification* as the entire episode is based on a juxtaposition of economic actors as subjects and objects. The episode’s paralleling of the modern economy with historic Christianity also helps students understand the perception of humans as having power over a systemic, human-created social institution. Furthermore, early in the episode, South Park citizens were in a state of fear after money, which was supposedly safely invested in banks, began disappearing in a way that seemed magical. Kyle then spends the episode trying to get his money back for his father’s margarita maker, only to realize that finding the true owner of the appliance is impossible because the debt was resold repeatedly, until the last holders were bailed out by the federal government. Thus, asking who ultimately paid for this debt and who economically benefited from buying and selling that debt helps students understand the top-down, exploitative nature of consumer capitalism. Lastly, as in many episodes, Cartman’s anti-Semitism should be addressed, and I remind students that Cartman’s scapegoating of Jews as the source of economic problems is one of the factors that made Hitler’s rise to power and The Holocaust possible.

Works Cited

- Dahms, Harry F. 1998. “Beyond the Carousel of Reification: Critical Social Theory after Lukács, Adorno and Habermas.” *Current Perspectives in Social Theory* 18: 3-62.
- Lukács, Georg. [1923] 1971. *History and Class Consciousness*. Translated by Rodney Livingston. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Name: _____

Identify whether the quotes below illustrate (S) people as acting **subjects** over an economy we control or (O) people as passive **objects** who helpless against powerful economic forces beyond their control.

_____ I'll tell you what happened, son! See, there's a bunch o' idiots out there who weren't happy with what they had! They wanted a bigger house and materialistic things that they didn't even need. People with no money who got loans to buy frivolous things they had no business buying. And these assholes just blindly started buying any stupid thing that looked appealing, 'cause they thought money was endless!

_____ The idiots couldn't see that by doing all this frivolous spending they were mocking the Economy. And they made the Economy very angry. We're all feeling the Economy's vengeance because of materialistic heathens who did stupid things with their money! Do you understand, son?

_____ And so why is our economy failing us? Because the government kept interest rates too low for too long! The government took our economy for granted and now we are all here paying the price!

_____ Do not listen to the Wall Street brokers! For they... are the ones that put us in this situation! Fat cats with corporate greed! They are the ones who knowingly drove us down this pathway of doom!

_____ There are different people casting all different kinds of blame from person to person. But the fault lies in all of you! You, who bought that three hundred thousand dollar house when you only had twenty thousand to put down. You, who bought that third car, even though only two people in your home drive!

_____ It is time to stop pointing fingers! We have mocked our economy. And now the economy has cast its vengeance on us all!

_____ Yea, it is an angry and unforgiving economy. To repent we must stop frivolous spending!

_____ We have become lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of the economy! There are those who will say that the economy has forsaken us! Nay! You have forsaken the economy!! And now you know the economy's wrath! O thoust can shop at a sporting goods store, but knowest thou that the economy will take away thy Broncos' cap from thine head! You have brought the economy's vengeance upon yourselves!

_____ Now look! The reason we're in this situation is because people are being stupid! The economy isn't some vengeful being that takes things away from us. The economy is just made up of people, and people have just lost their faith in it. What people really should be doing is spending more. Spending is fine. People should just go outside. They should go outside so they can meet with their friends and their families.

_____ Listen, this is all you need to know: the economy is not a supernatural all-knowing entity. The economy is just an idea, made up by people, thousands of years ago. The economy is not real. And yet, it is real. Nowadays they'll give credit to practically anyone who applies for them. I applied for this yesterday to prove a point. It is an American Express Platinum card. It has no spending limit. Do not be afraid! This is only plastic. It's just something made up by people. Truly meaningless and still we put our faith in it. Faith is what makes an economy exist. Without faith, it is only plastic cards and paper money.