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# Reproducing "Really Useful" Workers: Children's Television as an Ideological State Apparatus

*Benjamin Wright and Michael Roberts*



*This article compares three popular children's public television shows*—Thomas & Friends, Barney & Friends, *and* Bob the Builder—*to an earlier PBS children's program,* Sesame Street. *Utilizing Althusser's theory of ideology and Hall's theory on encoding/decoding, we examine the underlying process of signification in these media texts and argue that children's television plays an important role as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). We complicate the existing research on children's television programming and provide an alternative approach for understanding, situating the content of these shows against the sociohistorical changes in the social relations of production that have occurred since the emergence of neoliberal capitalism as a dominant ideological discourse. We argue that newer media texts such as* Thomas *are more closed than* Sesame Street, *which emerged prior to the shift toward neoliberalism, though in the newer programs contradictions exist that could serve to undermine rather than support neoliberalism.*

**Key Words:** Children's Television, Ideology, Neoliberalism, Public Broadcasting, *Thomas & Friends*

"Really useful engines are never late!" is a recurring refrain on *Thomas & Friends*, a television program aimed at a preschool- to kindergarten-aged audience. The representation of workers on *Thomas* (the show's main characters are railroad engines) as instruments to be used and other ideological content found in this program and others, like *Bob the Builder* and *Barney & Friends*, often reinforce various neoliberal capitalist values. By situating these television programs within the framework of an Althusserian theory of ideology, we seek to complicate existing research on children's television and offer an alternative way of understanding the phenomenon. Indeed, in contrast to research done by scholars celebrating children's programming on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) for its "educational" value, we argue that the three shows mentioned above provide examples of the unconscious representation of political economy for the fabrication of new neoliberal workers under the present social formation of capitalism. We also engage academics who portray *Sesame Street* in the postmodern, semiotic framework of "resistance," thereby interpreting *Sesame Street* as a text that lends itself to a form of "resistance postmodernism" (Kraidy 2002). In recent years, *Sesame Street* has had to share PBS



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airtime with newer children's shows that produce and encode texts that are relatively more closed and less able to be appropriated in practices of resistance to the political and social status quo. It is also the case that older programs contain contradictions that are neglected by "postmodern" interpretations that fail to examine the social relations of production under capitalism. We seek to emphasize differences and contradictions between newer and older children's television programming, and we argue that certain differences in encoded content can be explained, in part, by historical changes in the social formation of capitalism in recent decades—what Harvey (2005) refers to as the transition to "neoliberal" capitalism. In short, we seek to provide an explanatory framework that addresses the main weaknesses of analyses that use postmodern perspectives on children's television texts: namely, the lack of connections between texts and discourse and changes in the social formation of capitalism in recent decades.

Some prominent themes portrayed in the programs we examine include workers as instruments and the importance of timeliness, discipline, conformity, and busyness. We acknowledge that some of these values existed before the emergence of neoliberal capitalism, but in the context of the declining power of workers and labor unions, we argue that these themes have greater prominence in the repressive cultural climate of neoliberalism. This phenomenon can be seen in various representations of workers on these shows, including the issue of worker "disposability," the representation of the division of labor as "natural," and the normalization of the condition of working multiple jobs. These texts participate in the construction of legitimacy and consent given to the changing social relations of production that have occurred during the transition to a new social formation of capitalism in recent years. Some of the recent changes in the social relations of production include the changing nature of state intervention in the economy, the decline of the labor movement, the deregulation of industries, union busting, the decimation of pension plans, plans to increase the retirement age, falling wages, welfare "reform," and the dramatic increase in working hours (Bunting 2004; Harvey 2005; Schor 1991). Certain discursive changes in society have developed together with changes in the social relations of production we refer to as "neoliberalism." According to Harvey (2005), neoliberalism "values market exchange as 'an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action' … it emphasizes the significance of contractual relations in the marketplace. It holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market" (3).

A question we are interested in is how individuals become subjects within the neoliberal political-economic framework and how the media are involved in the process of reproducing the social relations of production in capitalism. We find Louis Althusser's (1971) analysis of ideology and its appropriation by Stuart Hall (1980) to be a fitting framework for understanding these particular programs as crucial instruments for the project of creating new subjects for the neoliberal political economy. We show how particular children's programs present certain cultural values and economic conditions as taken for granted or "obvious." The taken-for-granted understanding of timeliness, discipline, conformity, and other values conducive to the

neoliberal capitalist economic system is consistent with the argument that much of ideology passes for common sense. As Kukla (2002) argues,[1] ideologies are "systems of ideas that function to culturally inscribe a *naturalized* understanding of some social phenomenon that actually has its origins in a history of interests, human actions, and contingent social conditions" (68; emphasis in the original). In the three more recent shows we examine, certain social conditions that emerged during the transition to neoliberal capitalism are, indeed, (re)presented as "natural."

A key feature of the discourse of neoliberalism is the "normalization" of conditions that require workers to accept increased work hours, perhaps even second or third jobs, as well as more work-related discipline and surveillance. Another feature of neoliberalism is the legitimation of what is euphemistically referred to as labor market "flexibility," where employers are given greater power to terminate workers with impunity. As Willis (2000) argues, a major hallmark of the new cultural climate that has emerged with the shift to a neoliberal political economy is that workers are encouraged to believe that they *must* expect less—declining wages, fewer benefits, less free time—from everyday life in terms of material standard of living and that they must expect *more* in terms of more time at work and more discipline while at work. It is with these phenomena in mind that we agree with Kukla (2002) and Couldry (2008): the neoliberal order should be viewed as a system of cruelty that must be legitimated; television serves as a theatre of sorts, providing rituals for interpellation that legitimate and normalize this system. We argue that children's television on PBS is one moment among many in the cultural turn toward the new repressive environment that characterizes the neoliberal condition and that has the potential to reproduce the social relations of production in capitalism. This is not to suggest that the system is ever reproduced in exactly the same way or that reproduction is necessarily successful, as there are contradictions that undermine the process. Yet these contradictions are fewer in the new children's television shows that have emerged since the shift toward neoliberalism as a dominant ideology.

*Thomas & Friends* repeatedly delivers fatalistic messages that the given reality is all that can possibly exist. It and the other newer shows we examine represent a rightward shift from older PBS programs like *Sesame Street*, which at times delivers messages encouraging children to think creatively, enabling children to explore alternatives, and which clearly distinguishes between the realms of work and leisure. A case could certainly be made that, unlike *Thomas*, *Sesame Street* teaches children to be creative and imaginative, simultaneously calling on them to respect and welcome cultural diversity (Kraidy 2002). But while these are certainly positive values, they are not incompatible with neoliberal ideology, which emphasizes the embrace of individuality and difference in a context that reifies market-based social interaction (Harvey 2005; Wolff 2005).

In short, we seek to problematize the position taken by scholars like Kraidy (2002) and Serlin (1998) that *Sesame Street* should be viewed as a text encouraging cultural resistance per se, but our main focus is on the newer shows that have emerged since the transition to neoliberalism. What we see is an ideological shift in children's programming content on PBS that mirrors, to some degree, the emergence of

1. See also Couldry (2008) and Wolff (2005).

neoliberal discourse in recent decades. Postmodernist analyses tend to overlook these kinds of connections. While we focus primarily on newer shows like *Thomas*, *Barney*, and *Bob the Builder*, we compare these newer shows to particular examples from *Sesame Street* where it is appropriate to show content differences. It is our contention that a more adequate understanding of children's television texts can be developed by comparing *Sesame Street* to newer programs (rather than focusing solely upon the content of *Sesame Street* as representative of PBS children's television programming) and by grounding such comparisons in the larger context of changes in the class structure and social formation of capitalism and the concomitant hegemony of the discourse of neoliberalism.

Of specific interest to the present study are the following questions: To what extent is children's programming aimed toward the reproduction of the social relations of production, including the production of subjects of economy? In particular, do discursive patterns in children's programming on PBS resemble broader discursive patterns in neoliberal capitalist culture that have emerged in recent decades? If so, what are the parallels?



## The Significance and Popularity of Recent Children's Programming on PBS

*Thomas & Friends*, *Bob the Builder*, and *Barney* all emerged as popular shows during or after the transition to neoliberal political-economic policies in the United States and United Kingdom (UK). While it is not possible to precisely situate the period in which neoliberalism became a dominant Western discourse, it is generally understood that the push toward neoliberalism as a dominant ideology began in the mid 1970s and achieved dominant status in the United States and the UK in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Within a few decades, neoliberalism was able to attain a dominant ideological position in Western society, spreading globally due to a combination of force (for instance, the U.S.-sponsored military overthrow of Chile's democratically elected government) and consent, which was made possible by ideological factors. Harvey acknowledges the significant role played by what Althusser refers to as ideological state apparatuses (universities, schools, churches, the media, etc.), noting that the works of Marxist cultural theorists offer ways to understand how consent is manufactured in capitalist democracies as a way to achieve the dominance of neoliberalism without the use of direct physical violence. The abrupt and dramatic shift in power relations between capital and labor that is a key feature of neoliberalism can be interpreted in the three more recent shows we examine throughout this paper.

Each of the three newer shows reviewed in this study enjoys a great deal of popularity, as can be determined by sales revenues and ratings that rival *Sesame Street*. In 2002, sales revenue generated by products featuring children's television characters was estimated at $109 billion (Westcott 2002), with each program in this study consuming a significant share. In fact, *Thomas & Friends* alone has brought in approximately $100 million in retail sales every year since 1989, when the U.S. version, *Shining Time Station*, debuted on PBS (Lecesse 1999).

In terms of viewership, as of 2001 it was estimated that, in an average week, "5.6 million households tune in to *Sesame Street* and 7.5 million people aged two and older watch … For mothers aged 18–49 with children under 3—the most coveted demographic in TV—*Sesame Street* is the second-most-watched kids' show" (Bedford 2001). As of 2001, *Barney* was viewed by more than 11 million children on an average week and is classified as "One of the Top 5 shows for children ages 2–5 years old, Top 10 shows for children ages 2–11 years old, and Top 3 shows for mothers to watch with their children." It reaches children in more than 100 countries and, as of 2001, was one of the top five children's DVD brands in the United States.[2] *Bob* and *Thomas* are also among the highest-rated programs among preschool-aged children in the United States,[3] and both are widely viewed by children globally, particularly in the UK, where both shows originated.[4]

The targeted audience of these texts is children between two and five years old and, in the case of the United States where the shows appear on public television, a large segment of the audience is composed of children from minority and working-class backgrounds. "Black, Hispanic, low income and low education households make up a large percentage of PBS' daytime audience, exceeding that of the U.S. population with 15.5% Black (compared to 12.1% in the U.S.), 17.6% Hispanic (10.2%), 26.2% with an annual income lower than $20,000 (22.1%) and 19.9% with less than four years of high school (14.4%)."[5]

Due both to the vulnerable age at which children are targeted by the messages found in these programs (though the absorption of themes found in the encoded texts is another issue in itself) and the popularity of the shows, as can be deemed by ratings and revenues, it is important to understand how children's television media today functions as a central component of what Althusser referred to as the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) that helps "ensure *subjugation to the ruling ideology*" (2001, 89; emphasis in the original). Children's television texts are especially pervasive, as children on average spend more time per year watching television than attending school (Mayo and Nairn 2009, 24), rivaling the educational ISA that was central to Althusser's analysis. While subjugation to the dominant ideology is never fully guaranteed, and while this process is further complicated by contradictions and the possibility of alternative and sometimes oppositional readings of media texts, it is also the case that inculcating children with daily doses of the

2. "Barney," HIT Entertainment, accessed 5 Jul. 2013, http://www.hitentertainment.com/hitbrands/barney.swf.

3. "Sears Launches Bob the Builder(TM) Exclusive Apparel and Selected Accessories: Worldwide Preschool Sensation Makes His Debut in 860 U.S. Stores," PR Newswire, accessed 5 Jul. 2013, http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/sears-launches-bob-the-buildertm-exclusive-apparel-and-selected-accessories-71254022.html; "Thomas & Friends Joins PBS Kids' Weekday Schedule," PBS, accessed 5 July 2013, http://www.pbs.org/about/news/archive/2013/thomas-weekday-schedule/; see also Patrick (2006).

4. "About Bob the Builder," HIT Entertainment, accessed 5 Jul. 2013, http://www.hitentertainment.com/corporate/brandBob.aspx; "About Thomas & Friends," HIT Entertainment, accessed 5 Jul. 2013, http://www.hitentertainment.com/corporate/brandThomas.aspx; see also Whitlock and Mallory, n.d.

5. "Media Kit TV—Public Broadcasting Atlanta," PBA, accessed 27 Jun. 2013, http://www.pba.org/dictator/media/2610/_pba_30_media_kit.pdf.

dominant ideological discourse starting at an early age through multiple social institutions does, arguably, help push forth a system by which ideology passes as "just the way it is" or as an objective reality, key points in Althusser's (2001) theory on ideology and social reproduction.

## Althusser and Hall on Social Reproduction and Media

Although PBS is generally viewed as more educational as well as more progressive and enlightening than network or cable television (Chan-Olmstead and Kim 2002), it is also the case, as Stevenson (1995, 85) argues, that a key role of public television is to "legitimize the discourse of the state." This is, after all, one of the roles of the media, one of many institutions that Althusser refers to as ideological state apparatuses. One of the currently dominant discourses produced by the state is centered on the imperative for values supportive of neoliberalism as an economic, political, and cultural ideology.

Althusser (2001) states that in order to produce, every social formation must reproduce both the forces and the existing social relations of production, with the latter reproduced outside the factory doors. To this effect, skills and "know-how" must be instilled in individuals, creating a pool of labor that freely pushes forth the system that creates their exploitation. As discussed by Wolff (2005, 224), Althusser's theory of ideology explains "how workers and others imagined their relationship to economy and society." To Althusser (2001, 89), "The school, along with other institutions—including the media—teaches know-how" in ways that "ensure *subjugation to the ruling ideology.*" Not only are skills reproduced but so too are social roles that exist under the dominant ideology. While both sides of the state apparatus identified by Althusser—the repressive state apparatus (RSA: the army and the police) and the ideological state apparatus (ISA: educational institutions, the family, the media, etc.)—are key components of the superstructure, the ISAs are crucial to the process of social (re)production because they generate consent to the political and cultural status quo. This occurs in much the same way that neoliberalism was advanced in the United States and the UK (Harvey 2005) and much as consent was granted to the ideology of consumerism in the United States (Wolff 2005). While all ISAs contribute to the reproduction of the relations of production, each does so in its own unique way, inculcating "children and adults with specific ways of imagining—thinking about and thus understanding—their places within and relationships to the societies within which they live" (Althusser 2001, 225).

Althusser's analysis centers on the role of the educational institution, justifying its significance because of the impressionable age at which it begins to "teach" children these specific ways of imagining. "For years, the years in which the child is most 'vulnerable', squeezed between the family State apparatus and the educational State apparatus, it drums into them … a certain amount of 'know-how' wrapped in the ruling ideology" (Althusser 2001, 104). He explains that the school, like the marketplace, is portrayed in society as a neutral environment where teachers and students share mutual respect for each other and that parents generally believe the school will open doors to "freedom, morality and responsibility" (106). Subjects in

society view the role of the educational institution as "natural," assuming that it will ensure that necessary social positions are filled by those with the natural abilities and skills (viewed often as natural inborn inequalities) to best perform their role in the division of labor, a concept notably addressed in Plato's *Republic* and Durkheim's *Division of Labor in Society*. We argue that children's television shows play a similar role to the educational institution, and all the more pressing because children are presented with "'know-how' wrapped in the ruling ideology" at an even younger age (two to five years old) and because of the pervasiveness of children's TV characters and information in a young child's life. This may be particularly so with programming that appears on PBS because of its perceived role in educating and enlightening viewers. In short, we would add that in addition to being squeezed between the family and school ISAs, children are also squeezed by so-called "educational" programming.

The media, like the educational institution, delivers ideological messages by means of what Althusser refers to as "interpellation"—calling upon the audience as subjects. Interpellation is a process whereby individuals respond to and acknowledge ideologies and recognize themselves as subjects through ideology. Althusser refers to this process as a "hailing," which can be understood in terms of "the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!' … the hailed individual will turn around. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion he becomes a subject. Why? Because he recognized that the hail was 'really' addressed to him" (2001, 118). It is through an individual's moment of recognition that ideology is able to "recruit" that individual as a subject and this, in turn, grants the ideology legitimacy (117–8). It is this recognition that the individual is a subject, argues Althusser, that ultimately allows the individual to "freely choose" subjection, to essentially *not* be free, or to believe that an ideology is one's own (123). Rather than seeing ideological positions—thoughts, opinions, worldviews—as only existing inside the minds of individuals, Althusser argues that ideology exists within institutions. Indeed, ideology positions the individual self and the relation of the self to the larger social structures that constitute capitalist society. In other words, hailing is a process where language constructs a social position for the addressee, whereas interpellation is a broader communicative process that situates both addressee and sender within a larger structure of social relations in general.

Importantly, Althusser argues that the reproduction of the social formation is never guaranteed, acknowledging that contradictions exist which may be problematic for capitalism's continued survival. As Wolff (2005, 225) states, "The ideological (as also the political) conditions of capitalist class structures of production are always more or less a problem for capitalism and capitalists. The latter seek to shape and control them such that they provide the needed supports. However, they do so against contradictory social influences … that can make politics and ideology undermine more than they support capitalism."

For the purposes of our analysis, we find the Althusserian approach as appropriated by Stuart Hall (1980, 1997) most relevant. As Hall has argued, one way in which interpellation occurs is through the engagements we have with media texts, including television. When we take pleasure in consuming a television show in an uncritical manner, the media text "interpellates" us into a particular set of assumptions. We

tacitly accept a certain approach to being-in-the-world. Following Althusser, Hall (1997, 58) argues that we should theorize identity as "constituted, not outside but within representation; and hence cinema [or television] not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subjects."

Hall (1980) seeks to correct certain failings of earlier studies on media through an application of Marx's formulation of commodity production in capitalism as a circuit, a totality that has the following distinct "moments": production-distribution-consumption. While each moment is distinct and determinate, each is part of a larger process and therefore only "relatively autonomous" in its individual existence. This model, according to Hall, avoids what he sees as the problem of linearity in the older model of sender-message-receiver in communications research. According to Hall, the value of this Marxist approach is that "while each of the moments, in articulation, is necessary to the circuit as a whole, no one moment can fully guarantee the next moment with which it is articulated" (129). This model allows room for breaks or interruptions in the circuit, unlike the linear model of sender-message-receiver. In other words, it breaks from the behaviorism of previous models of research in media studies because it takes into account the active consumption of media texts by the audience rather than viewing the audience as passive recipients. In a Marxist framework, the process is understood as a dialectical phenomenon: individuals are positioned by the media text while they also simultaneously change the text as they consume it. To shed light on the dialectical nature of media production and consumption, Hall uses the terms "encoding" and "decoding" to explain the determinate moments in the discursive circuit of media messages. Encoding of texts takes place during the moment of production, while decoding takes place on the consumption side of the circuit. Producers of media encode texts; consumers of media decode texts. Since encoding and decoding are part of the same process, decoding is never completely independent from encoding. "Production and reception," according to Hall, "are not, therefore identical, but they are related: they are differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communicative process as a whole" (130).

We find this argument particularly important because it addresses what we see as a flaw in postmodern analyses of media texts, like that of Kraidy (2002). The main flaw in many postmodern analyses is that they tend to ignore the class structure of capitalism and the social relations of production that frame the process of media production and consumption. Hall's analysis allows for an active audience by emphasizing the phenomenon of "polysemy," but he is also careful to note that polysemy must not be confused with pluralism, a mistake made by some postmodern critiques that ignore the class structure of capitalism. Polysemy refers to the phenomenon where any given sign in a text can be converted to change the meaning of the text, as when a reader actively appropriates a text and converts it into something else during the act of consumption.

The problem, however, is that polysemy can easily slip into pluralism if the analysis seeks to demonstrate that individuals are free of any structural constraints when they consume media texts, a mistake which often happens as a result of ignoring the circuit's production side. Again, Hall's perspective draws upon Marx's (1993, 94)

theoretical reflection that "whether production and consumption are viewed as the activity of one or of many individuals, they appear in any case as moments of one process, in which production is the real point of departure and hence also the dominant moment." We agree with Hall that converting polysemy into pluralism is a serious mistake, because it glosses over the "structure of dominance" that exists in capitalist media production. Pluralism assumes that the media audience is merely a collection of individuals with roughly equal power, and more problematically, pluralism ignores the structural power of capitalist producers who encode texts. According to Hall (1980, 134; emphasis in the original), "any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*." The pluralist view is sometimes defined by media analysts as "selective perception," to describe what they view as private individual consumption/reading of media texts. Hall argues that encoding constructs "limits and parameters within which decoding will operate. If there were no limits, audiences could simply read whatever they liked into any message" (135). In order to correct the mistake of pluralism, Hall theorizes three distinct positions for decoding media texts: (*a*) dominant-hegemonic position, (*b*) negotiated position, and (*c*) oppositional position.

This model of three structurally distinct positions emphasizes the class structure that constitutes media production/consumption because it explains the process in terms of class struggle. Those in power attempt to gain consent through media messages, but the meanings of various media texts are always the terrain of negotiation and, sometimes, oppositional struggle. It is beyond the scope of our essay to take up all these positions. We focus, instead, on the process of *encoding* that is aimed at achieving ideological hegemony via the first position, "dominant-hegemonic," which Hall (1980, 136) explains as follows: "When the viewer takes the … meaning from, say, a television newscast… full and straight and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say the viewer is operating inside the dominant code." However, as Hall notes and as we emphasize throughout, contradictions emerge that do not always grant legitimacy to the dominant ideology, even if that is the aim of the producers/encoders.

Hall makes a further distinction, which we find important as a way to focus and organize our perspective. Within the structure of positions produced by the dominant code, there exist additional secondary positions produced by what he refers to as the "professional code," which operates within segments of the dominant-hegemonic code. These positions are occupied by the encoders of the media text. "This is the position," explains Hall (137; emphasis in the original), "which the professional broadcasters assume when encoding a message which has *already* been signified in a hegemonic manner." In other words, ideology situates or positions *both* producers/encoders and consumers/decoders of media texts. We see the broadcasting of children's programming on PBS as a secondary position produced by the professional code: encoders who occupy this position produce texts that repackage ideological messages into new forms, like that of *Thomas & Friends*, but the messages already circulate within other ISA institutions. It should be noted that Hall's own work on the media focuses more on productions and representations than audiences, which is also

why we find it useful in our analysis, which is not a study of audience decoding, though we do acknowledge the importance of such research for future studies.

The last point to cover in Hall's argument regards the semiotic significance of the televised image. Hall notes that the sign-content of the televised image is unique—compared to the role of the sign in traditional linguistics—because when a sign takes the form of a televised image, it lends itself to ideological coding in a much more direct way than the form of a linguistic (spoken or written) sign. This is because visual signs look like the objects (referents) in the "real" world. Unlike the spoken or written word, the visual sign of a cow looks like a cow. "The linguistic sign, 'cow,'" argues Hall (132), "possesses *none* of the properties of the thing represented, whereas the visual sign appears to possess *some* of those properties." When we consume visual signs it does not mean that no codes have intervened and mediated our experience with objects. Rather, visual signs in the form of the televised image make it *seem* as if there were no encoding or ideological interventions. This phenomenon makes for the possibility that some codes will be so widely distributed in a specific language community, and according to Hall, "learned at such an early age, that they appear not to be constructed—the effect of an articulation between sign and referent—but to be 'naturally' given. Simple visual signs appear to have achieved 'near-universality' in this sense: though evidence remains that even apparently 'natural' visual codes are culture-specific" (132). It is because of the unique nature of the visual sign, combined with the exposure of these signs to very young children, that we find ideological messages on children's television programming such a key component of the ISA in neoliberal capitalism.



## On the Labor Question: *Sesame Street*

*Sesame Street* was adopted for television in the United States in 1969, when social and political dissent—which arguably peaked in 1968—manifested in the streets, from the rank-and-file wildcat strikes and student movements to the antiwar movements, the feminist movements, and the continued fight for civil rights. We argue that the historical context from which *Sesame Street* emerged contributes to explaining significant content differences between it and the newer programs we analyze. In particular, we argue that representation of many of the main characters as "monsters" (Cookie Monster, Grover, Oscar the Grouch, etc.) signified the social flux and changing power relations that characterized the era of the sixties more generally. We argue that these character representations continue to signify fluidity and cannot easily be folded into the neoliberal ideological framework today.

As mentioned in the introduction, *Sesame Street* arguably does more to foster creative thinking than the other programs we examine. It also encourages children to embrace cultural diversity and makes clear the distinction between labor and leisure time, which the newer programs blur. While these first two points are not necessarily incompatible with neoliberal ideology, as can be evidenced by the examples that follow, *Sesame Street*'s text is certainly more conducive to open readings than the other programs we evaluate.

Regarding the topic of work, on the newer shows work is treated as something "fun," while free time will inevitability lead to boredom. This kind of message is strikingly different from *Sesame Street* where work is done because, as the furry blue monster Grover simply explains when asked about his multiple jobs (invoking Marx's distinction between the realms of freedom and necessity), "I've got to make a living."[6] In volume 3 of *Capital*, Marx (1971, 820) states, "The realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production … The shortening of the working day is its basic prerequisite." Unlike characters on the other shows we examine, characters on *Sesame Street*, as evidenced by Grover, work to live, whereas on the other shows they all too often live to work, an important value in neoliberal capitalism. *Sesame Street* does not treat work exclusively as fun but rather as necessity, something that must be completed to ensure the "proper" functioning of society. Grover explicitly says he works multiple jobs in order to *make ends meet*, not because he enjoys working as an *end in itself* as we find on the newer shows.

*Sesame Street*, not unlike the newer shows we examined, focuses on the role of the consumer in addition to the worker, but it does so in a manner that lends itself to a more open reading in which contradictions emerge that are not intentionally closed off. In "The Tutu Spell"[7] the issue of a general work stoppage is addressed. Zoe convinces her friend Abby Cadabby to let her play with her magic wand, which Zoe, a ballet enthusiast, uses to wish that everyone on Sesame Street would dance ballet for an entire day. When her wish comes true, Muppets and human characters alike are soon dancing in the streets. It is not long before all the characters begin to worry about unfinished work, with the whims of the consumer (e.g., Big Bird's anticipated birdseed milkshake, the toaster Maria and Luis had been repairing) emerging as central reasons Abby Cadabby must reverse Zoe's innocent wish. If everyone dances for an entire day, *even if they enjoy it*, work will not be done and consumers will be dissatisfied.

Certain contradictions emerge in this episode. On one hand, the desire for leisure is constrained by the necessity of work, but leisure (and the desire for leisure) is not framed as a problem in itself. On the contrary, leisure activities are to an extent depicted as normal, enjoyable, and distinctly separate from work. On the other hand, the reason work must resume is framed around the whims of the consumer,[8] upholding the argument that children and adults are interpellated to imagine, in the Althusserian sense, their relationship with society primarily from a consumerist position, defining "themselves as above all 'consumers'" (Wolff 2005, 230).

When there is a work stoppage, the inconveniences caused to the consumer emerge as the primary reason for why work must continue, drumming home the ideology of consumer culture. It remains the case, however, that *Sesame Street*'s text is more open to alternative readings than the other programs in this study. The focus on the desires of Zoe could be decoded as a representation of freedom. If it were not for

6. *Sesame Street: A Celebration of Me, Grover* (Sony Music Video, 2004), DVD.
7. "The Tutu Spell," *Sesame Street*, episode no. 4140, aired 21 Aug. 2007 by PBS.
8. Also found in the special *Sesame Street: Elmopalooza* (Sony Music Video, 1998), DVD.

the needs of the consumer, the workers would much rather use their time freely. These contradictions within messages delivered by the culture industry provide the basis for alternatives to be realized (Althusser 2001; Wolff 2005).

*Sesame Street* has other messages that could be interpreted as supportive of values that prop up neoliberal ideology, such as the signification of the "natural division of labor" represented in the song "The People in Your Neighborhood." In that popular song, the division of labor is presented as a "given," something that just exists. Another example of the natural division of labor on *Sesame Street* is the representation of the character Mr. Hooper, a small shop owner who embodies the cultural values of the traditional petite bourgeoisie, including the capitalistic work ethic and endless deferment of gratification.

Other characters like Cookie Monster are more complicated and contradictory. Cookie Monster celebrates instant gratification in opposition to the valorization of endless work for work's sake (a key feature of neoliberalism). Frank Oz, one of the creators of the character Cookie Monster, described the character as "insatiable," and other veterans of *Sesame Street* describe Cookie Monster as Oz's unconscious, or "id." As Blair (2008) notes, the representation of the id in the form of Cookie Monster is not portrayed in dark terms. On the contrary, Cookie Monster represents the id as "sweet" and "sensual." Writer Norman Stiles explains, "All of his monomania … would not stop him from helping someone else … He's not gonna knock anybody over to get a cookie" (1).

Furthermore, because many of the *Sesame Street* characters are "monsters"—as opposed to shows like *Thomas* and *Bob the Builder*, where the main characters are machines—the texts produced by *Sesame Street* provide more openings for alternative readings than the newer shows. Unlike machines, which are instruments for manipulation, monsters are creatures that *defy* categorization, representing instability in the texts, which in turn can be seen as evidence that demonstrates the possible resistance to neoliberal ideology. As we noted earlier, the instabilities that remain in the *Sesame Street* texts have their historical origins in the late sixties, which was an era of significant social and cultural transformation predating the emergence of neoliberal discourse. The monsters are still the most popular characters, and their relationship to neoliberal discourse continues to be unstable. In short, we argue that the representation of monsters in these texts signifies the possibility of resistance to and escape from the hegemony of neoliberal ideology.

Critics like Serlin (1998, 108–9) originally interpreted the show as a "radical vision of a proactive, pluralistic neighborhood," adding that while the show's message has "softened over the years, *Sesame Street*'s aesthetic sensibility still seems to draw from the early 1970s." The perceived softening in the show's original discourse may in part be due to neoliberalism's growing ideological prominence, but as Serlin demonstrates, the original aesthetic sensibilities that produce openings in the text endure. In the next section, we will explore more recent PBS children's shows, all of which were created after the rise of neoliberalism. We argue that these programs seem to be more involved in the consolidation of neoliberal discourse/ideology.

## Encoding the "Really Useful Engine" Model: Neoliberal Content in the Textual Encoding of Children's Television Programming on PBS

### *Thomas & Friends*: The Thatcher and Reagan Years

Despite claims to foster creative imagination, *Thomas & Friends* was adopted for the UK airwaves in 1984 when privatization and union-busting became focal issues following Thatcher's reelection, and it seems to discourage free thinking, as the show's narrative rewards conformity and punishes difference. Whatever imagination takes place seems to do so in the Althusserian sense of ideology. In other words, ideology already limits the amount and the direction of "creative imagination" that the show claims to encourage. Via an unconscious representation of political economy, children are taught to follow rules and to be essentially docile and obedient workers. Through various characters, children are interpellated to imagine their own positions in relation to larger society. On the program's website, the character Duncan, who likes to "rock 'n' roll" whenever the mood takes him, is described as one who "tends to have a mind of his own which makes him obstinate and rude on occasions," implicitly suggesting that failure to conform to the status quo produces generally unfavorable personal characteristics. Given the longstanding conflicts between Ireland and England it is perhaps not coincidental that Duncan, who is coded as a "problem worker," has a thick Irish brogue as compared to obedient workers like Percy and Thomas, who have proper English accents. *Thomas* repeatedly delivers messages reinforcing the status quo and supporting the dominant ideology, particularly in regard to what is expected of workers in this phase of advanced capitalism.

In "Middle Engine"[9] the value of timeliness is couched with another lesson on the importance of obeying rules:

> Percy was not allowed to cross the loading ramp until the tipper had been turned off. It was against the rules. But as soon as his driver and fireman left, there was trouble. Henry arrived to pick up coal. He bumped into the coal cars and the coal cars bumped into Percy. Percy was pushed onto the loading ramp. "Help!" cried Percy.
>
> After Percy was loaded back onto the ground, the manager was very cross. "You have caused confusion and delay," he said. "I will have to report this to Sir Topham Hatt." That night, Sir Topham Hatt spoke harshly to Percy.

This particular tale ends with Sir Topham Hatt, the railway manager, demoting Percy and giving him less pleasant work to perform. In this case the value of timeliness is expounded with disregard to circumstance. It is the individual worker who is responsible for all that occurs on the job, and it is the worker (Percy) who is punished for any resulting accident or delay. When the worker causes delay, disposability is

9. "Middle Engine," *Thomas & Friends: Percy's Chocolate Crunch & Other Thomas Adventures*, (HIT Entertainment, 2003), DVD.

justified, a key aspect of the "flexible labor market" that corresponds to the neoliberal order.

Before proceeding with the analysis of the representation of timeliness, it is prudent to briefly assess the role of Sir Topham Hatt and the show's setting, the land of Sodor. The world of Thomas the Tank Engine was previously described on the *Thomas & Friends* website[10] as "an idyllic place with a willingness to embrace good manners, hard work and a desire to be *Really Useful*," adding, "All this takes place under the watchful eye of Sir Topham Hatt, the manager of the Sodor Railway" (as of 2008 before site redesign; emphasis in the original). Sir Topham Hatt (referred to in the UK version as "the fat controller" and made to resemble the capitalist archetype with an iconic top hat and morning suit) was described on the show's website as "the director of the Railway [who] is responsible for making sure the engines are always Right on Time and Really Useful. He has a firm but kind manner in dealing with the engines and staff, and has risen through the ranks from a railway engineer to his current position." This description alone implies much about the ideological discourse of upward mobility and worker-management relations. By suggesting that he "has risen through the ranks," children are encouraged to believe that good manners, hard work, and conformity will eventually pay off despite the sad reality that even with obedience and hard work, few will actually move up the ranks to upper management.

The second lesson implied is that workers should be timely and useful and that management should be "firm but kind" in relations with workers, maintaining a paternalistic workplace ethic and an order conducive to capital's demands. The differences between the characters and their consequential social value is depicted throughout various episodes as Sir Topham Hatt is often seen relaxing while his workers toil endlessly, meanwhile generally content with their social roles. A contradiction arises when one compares the timeliness expected of workers on this show with the representation of the employer's free time. Workers, unlike Topham Hatt, are expected to be timely and to labor diligently. Workers (the main characters are railroad engines) are consistently coded as instruments to be used by capital. Indeed, the normalization and celebration of "usefulness" is the central trope that organizes the entire series. Alienation, then, is always already the normal condition for workers. Through the representation of the main characters as instruments (also found on *Bob the Builder*), children are positioned to accept as given phenomena like obedience and work-based surveillance, which is an important component of contemporary work environments (Bunting 2004; Couldry 2008).

Like timeliness, the celebration of busyness is a common theme in many *Thomas* episodes, with an overriding message that being busy is commendable. A clear example can be found in "Peter Sam and the Refreshment Lady,"[11] which begins: "Sir Handel had been naughty, so Sir Topham Hatt had him stay in the shed for a while … Peter Sam was now busier than ever. He had to do Sir Handel's work as well as his own. He was very excited. 'Anyone would think that he wanted to work,' said Sir Handel, who was lonely and bored. 'All respectable engines do,' said Skarloey."

10. "Thomas and Friends," HIT Entertainment, accessed 27 Feb. 2008, http://www.thomasandfriends.com.
11. *Thomas & Friends: Sing-Along & Stories* (HIT Entertainment, 1998), DVD.

The lesson that busyness is good is delivered at two levels. First, in stating that Peter Sam was "very excited" about performing extra work, it is suggested that being busy for the sake of busyness is something one should enjoy. On the second level, this message is encoded into the text by describing Sir Handel, who is resting, as "lonely and bored." The coding of leisure as desirable, more readily apparent on *Sesame Street*, is in this case reversed. Work displaces leisure and any leftover leisure time is encoded with a negative connotation. The representation of the engine Peter Sam being "very excited" about having *more* work is the moment of recognition in the Althusserian sense, as children are positioned to identify with that character. In other stories, the notion of a spontaneous division of labor with a focus on "natural" inequalities is advanced. In "A Bad Day for Harold,"[12] for instance, Percy the Engine is upset with Harold the Helicopter for taking his job as mail deliverer. Percy complains, "Delivering the mail is an engine's job." However, while there are circumstances preventing a spontaneous division of labor from occurring in every occasion, giving rise to contradictions, the general message that the division of labor represents "natural" inequalities is delivered.

The anthropomorphism of machines is crucially important in our view. In both *Thomas* and *Bob the Builder*, machines are a metaphor for human workers as subjects of economy produced by neoliberal ideology. Under capitalism, workers are acted upon in order to be manipulated by capital. The representation of characters as machines positions the audience to recognize the "obviousness" in the Althusserian sense: it is "obvious" that workers in capitalism exist as instruments to be used. This represents an important break from texts on *Sesame Street*. The Muppets on *Sesame Street* do not function in the same way as the machines in the newer shows. First, Muppet characters are granted legitimacy as "real" characters through television talk show interviews and films. Furthermore, Muppets resemble monsters (and larger-than-life animals), by definition exceeding categorization and manipulation. Whereas machines exist for the sake of instrumentality, monsters represent deviance. They can be in an animal or a human form and can significantly deviate from normal shapes and behaviors of humans and animals. The representation of main characters as monsters on *Sesame Street* allows for multiple creative readings of texts since the signifier "monster" is somewhat ambiguous and does not have a stable referent. This is quite different from shows like *Thomas* and *Bob the Builder* where the images of the main characters—railroad engines and construction machines—"possess some of the properties of the referents," to borrow a phrase from Hall (1980, 132). In other words, because the sign and referent are more stable and relatively more fixed when the character is a railroad engine or a tractor, the encoding of the text creates more constraints upon the decoder of the text than when the signifying image is a monster. It is also for this reason that *Thomas* and the newer shows are more directly involved in the production of subjects of economy under neoliberalism.

One of the most disturbing messages delivered on *Thomas*, and a key feature of neoliberalization that is not found in any of the other shows in this analysis, is the message that workers can be disposed of when no longer needed by the system.

12. *Thomas & Friends: Salty's Secret & Other Thomas Adventures* (HIT Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

Therefore, if workers are no longer "useful" or if they fail to conform, they can be readily discarded and replaced. We see this play out in three different scenarios: temporary disposability, permanent disposability, and disposability due to worker insubordination in the form of a general work stoppage (strikes), each of which emphasizes the need for "flexible labor markets" conducive to neoliberalism. Harvey (2005, 169) argues that under neoliberalization "the figure of the 'disposable worker' emerges as prototypical upon the world stage."

In "The Fogman"[13] viewers are introduced to Cyril the Fogman, whose job is to place detractors on the railway tracks to warn engines of fog ahead. Later in the episode, Sir Topham Hatt unveils to his engines a new invention: a foghorn designed to perform Cyril's job. This causes Thomas concern: "Thomas looked worried. 'What will Cyril do now?' he asked. 'He will be getting a much needed rest,' said Sir Topham Hatt. 'Besides, this new foghorn will be more reliable.' 'Poor Cyril,' whispered Thomas, 'he's been scrapped.'"

Fortunately for Cyril, the fog machine proves too loud and powerful, causing a rockslide and, consequently, accident and delay. Cyril, though his employment has ceased, comes to the rescue and prevents future accidents. As a result of the foghorn's malfunction and Cyril's demonstrated usefulness, Topham Hatt rehires him. While Cyril is rehired, this episode nonetheless encodes an important neoliberal message: the relentless application of technology to the labor process, resulting in the domination of workers, is simply a given.

The story "Saved From Scrap"[14] begins, "Sir Topham Hatt works his engines hard, but they are very proud when he calls them 'really useful,'" already hinting at the notion that when an engine (or a worker) is no longer considered useful, s/he may be terminated. In this story, Edward the Engine is on a trip to pick up materials at the scrap yard and encounters Trevor the Tractor, who confides to Edward that he is to be turned into scrap because his owner believes that he is "old-fashioned." While Edward is able to find a Reverend to "save" Trevor, it seems certain that other machines must not be so lucky. And although in both of these episodes characters escape from the threat of disposability, the phenomenon itself is presented as an immutable *given*. In both cases, ideology encodes messages that position the audience in relation to changes in the labor process that are depicted as given; social contingencies are (re) presented as nonnegotiable. Technology is not (re)presented as a phenomenon that can be applied as a result of democratic decision-making processes. On the contrary, technology dominates workers.

While engines and other workers on *Thomas* are rarely able to see that their employer's interests are different from their own, they are usually too busy quarreling with one another to recognize their shared interests as workers. Though the trains often argue over who works harder and faster, become frustrated when one of them is late, and play tricks that get one another into trouble, they also look out for each other and save one another from troublesome situations (i.e., being "scrapped"). In an unusual case when we see workers organize themselves in

13. *Thomas & Friends: Salty's Secret & Other Thomas Adventures* (HIT Entertainment, 2002), DVD.
14. *Thomas & His Friends Help Out* (HIT Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

opposition to the boss on grounds of unacceptable working conditions, the text immediately closes off the possibility of an oppositional reading by situating the audience *against* the workers.

In "Tenders and Turntables,"[15] for instance, we find the following:

> Henry and Gordon were lonely when Thomas left the yard to run his branch line. They missed him very much. They had more work to do and had to fetch their own coaches. The big engines thought they were too important to fetch coaches. James grumbled, too. "We get no rest! We get no rest!" they all complained. But the coaches only laughed. "You're lazy and slack! You're lazy and slack!" they answered. Altogether, the engines were causing Sir Topham Hatt a great deal of trouble.

Later in the episode, Gordon complains that it is "not the proper thing" for big engines to do the same work as smaller engines, representing the allegedly natural inequalities in the division of labor and the need for capital to foster divisions among workers. Unhappy with the work they must do, the big engines decide to strike. Although we see collective action among the engines, the striking engines are coded as the problem, for children (as the intended audience) are not positioned to identify *with* the engines on strike but *against* them. Children are further positioned by the text to sympathize with Sir Topham Hatt and to identify with the railway passengers (the consumers, which we see in the next episode). In other words, the young audience is positioned to be hailed in such a way as to identify as consumers against the disobedient workers in a manner similar to Wolff's (2005) analysis of ideology and workers. Certain broadcasting techniques specific to the "professional code" are also used in the process of ideological positioning. For example, in the British version of the show, a laugh track is dubbed in when we see the big engines who are described by the narrator as "lazy and slack."

When workers are coded as obedient, ideology functions in the text to position the audience to identify with the characters under the trope of "usefulness." On the other hand, when workers deviate and disrupt production, the text positions the audience to identify with the consumers (passengers) and take a position against the representation of unruly workers. This type of ideological positioning via representation of disruptive workers is very similar to news coverage of railroad strikes and strikes in general in the mainstream media: strikes conducted by workers are typically framed as a disruption for consumers and society at large. For example, a headline from the *Chicago Tribune* on July 19, 1996, reads, "Looming U.S. Freight Train Strike May Derail Metra Line Commuters." The signifier "strike" hails readers as antiunion because striking is constructed as a destructive action by labor unions that threatens ("derails") the normal day-to-day activities of consumers and citizens. Commuters are framed as the victims of deviant workers. Strikes are also sometimes framed by the media as threats to "national security," as was the case in 1981 when President Reagan used his executive powers to fire all the air traffic controllers who

15. *Thomas & His Friends Get Along & Other Thomas Adventures* (HIT Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

went on strike shortly after Reagan was elected. By separating out striking workers from consumers and citizens, the news media positions readers against workers (Martin 2003). *Thomas & Friends* performs similar kinds of hailing.

In what seems to be the continuation of "Tenders and Turntables," "Trouble in the Shed"[16] identifies workers as causing the "trouble": "Sir Topham Hatt sat in his office listening to the noise outside. Passengers were angry. The station master came in. 'There's trouble in the shed, Sir. Henry is sulking. There's no train and the passenger cars are saying this is a bad railway.' 'Indeed!' said Sir Topham Hatt, 'We cannot allow that!' He found Gordon, James and Henry looking very cross."

Sir Topham Hatt's solution to the labor dispute is not to split the work more evenly or make it less burdensome but to hire small engine replacement workers to perform all of the work of the big engines, laying out the need for the existence of a surplus army of labor to replace workers when they do not perform according to capital's expectations. When Topham Hatt calls forth Edward to start taking over the work, the big engines hiss steam at him. Then Sir Topham Hatt goes to look at new engines to hire for his railway. He finds a small green steam engine and says, "That's the one. If I choose you, will you work hard?" The engine replies, "Oh, sir, yes sir!" "That's a good engine," Sir Topham Hatt answers. "I'll call you Percy." "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Percy responds in a proper English accent. Percy, we learn, is a hard-working, respectful, and obedient worker who, because he was previously stored in a warehouse with other engines, is very eager to begin work. Again, when the character Percy responds with "sir, yes sir," the audience is positioned to identify with the obedient worker and accept the relationship between capital and labor as simply given.

In many ways this and other neoliberal messages reinforce and justify the existence of policies that were enforced under Thatcher and subsequent prime ministers in the UK (similar to the example of Reagan and the striking PATCO workers). The engines on Thomas, representative of workers, are taught to keep busy, be timely, and not deviate from the status quo. If they deviate, the message is delivered that they will be punished by either social distancing or replacement. In other words, if they are not "really useful"—the key ideological message of this program—they can expect to be disposed of or disciplined accordingly. These characters figure as metaphors for the subjects of economy in neoliberal capitalism.

## *Barney & Friends*: The Clinton Years

Following the market crash of 1987, the savings and loan crisis, and the recession of the early 1990s, much emphasis was placed on the economy during the 1992 U.S. presidential election. Like his predecessor, Clinton embraced and later enacted many neoliberal policies. But he was savvy in his approach to placate the traditional members of the Democratic Party base—women, labor, racial and ethnic minorities, and the elderly—as well as the corporate interests that financed his campaign. Thus, Clinton pledged to have a cabinet that looked like America, referring to changing racial and cultural demographics. While Clinton's embrace of diversity may be subject

16. *Thomas & His Friends Help Out* (HIT Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

to criticism for embracing diversity not for the sake of accepting difference but for further incorporation into the economic system, it is interesting to note how this lines up with the overall messages delivered on *Barney & Friends*.

Like *Sesame Street*, it can certainly be argued that *Barney* has a greater educational value than *Thomas* and *Bob the Builder*. Unlike *Thomas & Friends*, whose characters generally tend to depict white males (perhaps more consistent with a neoconservative version of neoliberalism with its lack of diversity and its coding of workers with Irish accents as "rude and obstinate"), *Barney* offers more diversity and teaches children to respect difference, though, as with *Sesame Street*, this is not inconsistent with neoliberal ideology. It perhaps just represents a more nuanced version of the type of ideology found on *Thomas*, one suitable for bringing more individuals under the rule of the market. Essentially, it is interpellation with different means but the same end.

Children on *Barney* come from various backgrounds and are taught to work together with mutual understanding and common respect for each other's differences, which undoubtedly is a good lesson for children. But despite greater respect for diversity and seemingly more emphasis on the importance of creativity and imagination, *Barney* (like *Thomas*) reinforces lessons about the importance of busyness and the natural division of labor (with emphasis on individualism, as the "natural" talents of the individual suit him/her for a particular role), in line with the neoliberal ideologies that were promoted by both major U.S. political parties in 1992. Although Barney is a character that exists in leisure spaces (unlike Bob and Thomas, who are workers, which might suggest that *Barney & Friends* does not prop up neoliberal ideology), signs of neoliberalism are present in *Barney*, though perhaps more subtly than one would find in *Thomas*. This, however, is consistent with changes in the social formation of capitalism that occurred around that time.

In *Barney*'s *Let's Go to the Zoo*,[17] for instance, the joint themes that busyness is good and work is fun are found with a teacher who works weekends at the zoo. This emphasizes the value of being busy, but more importantly, it normalizes the need to work more than one job in the neoliberal economic environment. Working two or more jobs out of necessity due to the decline in the number of good-paying, stable jobs is a new and growing phenomenon with the rise of the neoliberal order, but the text produced by this *Barney* episode codes the phenomenon as "obvious" in the Althusserian sense. The teacher, Ms. Kepler, encounters Barney and his other dino friends, BJ and Baby Bop, at the zoo. BJ says to her, "I didn't know you work here," to which Ms. Kepler replies, "I like to help out *when* I'm not busy at school." The possibility that an adult *may not choose* to work two jobs but *must* out of economic necessity is never presented as a plausible explanation. On the contrary, the audience is positioned to identify with BJ and to recognize the teacher's situation as common sense (just the way it is). Later in the episode, the two overarching themes of busyness and work being fun are repeated when Barney says, "Oh, Ms. Kepler, it seems like you're always on the go." In response, Ms. Kepler states, "That's what makes this job *so much fun*!" While it is perhaps the case that Ms. Kepler does enjoy her job, the *possibility* that she may work multiple jobs out of economic necessity is

17. *Barney*'s *Let's Go to the Zoo* (HIT Entertainment, 1992), VHS.

never raised here as it is on *Sesame Street*. In our view, this reveals the subtlety of ideology. The idea that work is fun is normalized along with the condition of adults working several jobs. The demise of leisure and the emergence of work without end, two hallmarks of neoliberal capitalism, become eternally present via (re)presentation of historical phenomena as simply given (Schor 1991).

The coding of work as fun is the key underlying process of signification in the texts produced on these episodes of *Barney*. In the video *Let's Go to the Beach*,[18] this theme is repeated along with the related idea that it is normal to work multiple jobs, further shrinking the realm of freedom. This particular video begins with several children longingly gazing out a tree house window, waiting for the rain to stop so that they can play outside. By employing their imaginations, they bring Barney to life and picture themselves on the beach. When Barney's friends stop at "Dandy Sandy's Seaside Store and Snack Shack," they encounter their school librarian, Mr. Boyd, who explains that he works at the beachside store in the summer when school is out of session (not unlike Ms. Kepler):

> MR. BOYD. Hi kids! Welcome to my store!
> GIRL 1. Your store?!? I thought you work at our school?
> MR. BOYD. I do. But I take off every summer to work here. I get to enjoy the beach and help other people have fun, too.
> GIRL 2. Wow!!!

While the episode says nothing about financial reasons that may compel Mr. Boyd to work a summer job, his reasoning is simply that it is fun to work at the beach, similar to Ms. Kepler in the previous example. Ironically, adults take time "off" in order to work *more*, and the distinction between work and leisure, which could be interpreted in more open texts like *Sesame Street*, is collapsed just as it is in *Thomas & Friends* in the instant of recognition when Girl 2 exclaims "Wow!" thereby normalizing Mr. Boyd's situation. The contingent history of declining state revenues for education, which has had devastating consequences for librarians and teachers, is transformed into a given, simply the way it is; history becomes the eternal present. While children are encouraged to be imaginative, they are positioned to recognize that working multiple jobs and having fun at work are both given realities. The audience sees this as normal and perhaps even exciting as they are exposed to the willingness of the show's characters to embrace this phenomenon with enthusiasm.

The video *You Can Be Anything*[19] drums home the notion of a natural division of labor in several examples, as well as the related work-is-fun concept. The video opens with Barney's friend Kim reading a book, pretending to be a librarian. She exclaims, "I love being a librarian! I get to read all my favorite books." The other children, who are also pretending to be working adults, are equally excited about their pretend jobs. When BJ the Dinosaur enters, he asks what the children are doing. "We're pretending to be grown-ups," one replies, at which point they burst into a song, the chorus of which emphasizes the fun of working:

18. *Let's Go to the Beach* (HIT Entertainment, 2006), DVD.
19. *You Can Be Anything* (HIT Entertainment, 2002), DVD.

Each day I work, what fun it will be,
I'll always do my responsibility.
I'll do what I do so carefully
When I grow up to be big me.

In all of these episodes of *Barney*, the notion that work is fun is a commonly recurring theme, with certain implications for children who tune in. In addition, in each of these episodes, there is a moment of recognition where individual children with whom the audience is situated to identify are positioned as subjects of neoliberal economy.

While *Barney* teaches children to use their imaginations, it teaches them to imagine only within the confines of the given system. At the same time, its positioning reproduces the social relations of production. In other words, children are taught to imagine, in the Althusserian sense, their positions in and in relation to the given society in a very particular way. They are interpellated so as to condense work and leisure into one (as with Mr. Boyd and Ms. Kepler) and to view the division of labor (as with the example of Kim) and the holding of multiple jobs as completely natural phenomena, without regard to historical context or alternative explanations. Economic life is what it is, and this is presented to children from varied backgrounds and categories of identity as an *unquestionable reality*.



## *Bob the Builder*: The Blair Years

*Bob the Builder*, like *Barney & Friends*, incorporates more diversity into its claymation episodes than does *Thomas*, reflecting the pledges made by Tony Blair to embrace diversity and develop a "more caring Britain"—but it still treats economic life as an impenetrable force and teaches children about the necessity of conforming to the status quo, keeping busy, and being timely, and it even problematizes the existence of free time. However, unlike *Barney* (and *Sesame Street*), *Bob the Builder* arguably does less to expand the creative and imaginative potential of children. The distinction between work and fun is collapsed; busyness and a strict division of labor emphasizing natural differences inherent in the individual are promoted, just as with *Barney*. But like *Thomas & Friends*, the other UK-based show in this study, leisure is problematized, and the need for the surveillance of workers is made prominent.

*Bob the Builder* delivers the message that talking and communication prevent workers from completing work on time, and therefore workers should be micromanaged to ensure that nothing prevents them from attaining maximum productivity. In "Clocktower Bob,"[20] Muck the Digger Dump Truck is scolded by a fellow worker, Scoop the Bulldozer, for telling Dizzy the Cement Mixer a joke.

Scoop: Hey Muck, stop chattering and let Dizzy get on with her mixing.
Muck: I was only telling her a joke.

20. *Bob the Builder: To the Rescue* (HIT Entertainment, 2001), VHS.

SCOOP: We don't have time for jokes! We're running late and it'll be dark soon.
MUCK: (sadly) Oh, okay. I was only having a little fun.

The overriding message is that time is of the essence and anything, even mild sociability, that prevents a worker from timely completion of work is unacceptable.

Highly related to the value of productivity are messages that busyness for busyness's sake is good and that work should be understood as "fun." In "Bob's Barnraising,"[21] Lofty the Mobile Crane says to the other machines, "I hope [Bob's] got some lifting for me to do!" Muck replies, "Yeah, I want some fun!" The implication for those who do not enjoy work is that they are either in the wrong job field (they are not following their calling or the division of labor is not a spontaneous one) or that there is something wrong with them as individuals. Demonstrating the subtlety of ideology, the text operates in a way that diverts criticism away from the system of production itself and the social relations that exist under such a system.

On *Bob the Builder*, work is glorified to such an extent that even breaks are sometimes opportunities to complete *more* work, and Bob is tied to his work even in his "downtime" through fax machines, cell phones, and other technology. The human characters, Bob and Wendy, forgo many breaks and meals because they do not want to take away from their working time. The clearest example of giving up free time in exchange for work time occurs in "Bob's Day Off."[22] In this story, Bob awakens early in the morning to go bird watching. Wendy was planning on completing the day's project, but when her computer suddenly malfunctions and she has to call her computer repairman, she calls Bob on his cell phone to ask him if he would complete the project while she waits for the repairman to arrive. Bob, the loyal worker that he is, agrees, finishes the job, and returns to Farmer Pickles's field to bird watch. When Wendy receives a fax regarding another urgent job and because the computer repairman still has not arrived, she calls upon Bob again, and then again. Bob repeatedly and willingly sacrifices most of his "free time" to work.

One key component of the neoliberal order identified by Couldry (2008, 6) is that "In the contemporary neoliberal economy, workers are facing (under the guise of expanded 'freedom'—the freedom to 'keep in touch' with work!) the last stage of the reorganization of labor-time whose origins [E.P.] Thompson traced." In this stage there is an expansion in "the employer's influence into time that was not originally labor-time at all: time for eating, resting, playing, maintaining a family." While Bob appears to be self-employed, he is nonetheless seemingly more than willing to surrender leisure time for work time.

Another way that free time is problematized on this show is that time not spent working is time that the people and machines often do not know how to handle. In "Muck's Mood,"[23] Muck is upset because everyone but her has been assigned a job. When Wendy finally assigns Muck a chore, Muck is noticeably excited. Similarly, in

21. *Bob the Builder: Can We Fix It?* (HIT Entertainment, 2001), DVD.
22. *Bob the Builder: Celebrate with Bob* (HIT Entertainment, 2002), DVD.
23. *Bob the Builder: To the Rescue* (HIT Entertainment, 2001), VHS.

"Roley's Important Job,"[24] Roley is disappointed because all of the machines have work to do except for him. Unable to find better use of his time, he accompanies Bob and the other machines to the job site, patiently waiting in case they are able to find work for him. The notion of free time as a *problem* is a frequently recurring theme on *Bob the Builder*. While the value of leisure time is often given prominence in *Sesame Street*, it is viewed in *Bob the Builder* as a hindrance to productivity. *Bob the Builder* also delivers the message that even the *desire* for free time should be suppressed, as workers who deviate from the norms and their expected roles are reprimanded for their actions.

In "Spud in the Clouds,"[25] Spud the Scarecrow and Travis the Tractor are seen relaxing for a moment, looking for shapes in the clouds. Travis worriedly asks Spud, "Oh no, weren't we supposed to be doing something?!?" Farmer Pickles angrily enters, replying, "Yes, you were! You were supposed to be taking my corn to the market, not daydreaming with your head in the clouds!" Spud and Travis reject work in several stories, and both are coded as troublesome characters not to be taken seriously. Spud, for instance, is often the target of jokes and is depicted as mischievous and troublesome. In "Travis and Scoop's Race Day,"[26] Scoop the Bulldozer says to Spud, who is relaxing with Travis under the shade of a tree, "Not working today Spud?" Spud answers, "Naw, it's too hot. And we've … been given the day off." Farmer Pickles enters, reprimanding them: "Not by me you haven't! Go on and get back to work you two!" Spud and Travis apologize to Farmer Pickles while the other machines laugh at the expense of the two workers coded as slackers.

Not only are the characters on *Bob the Builder* expected to be disciplined workers who toil busily and who wisely budget their time, but the message is delivered that workers should not, or cannot, think for themselves. The machines on *Bob* (as with *Thomas*) serve as metaphors for human workers and receive all of their direction from the title character.

In "Bob's Top Team,"[27] the machines all wait eagerly for Bob to tell them what their job will be for the day. They follow him around the job site, waiting for him patiently. When he gives them their assignments, he tells them that they must wait for him while he finishes work on another project. All of the machines obediently wait while Bob works inside of the town's new visitor center. Finally, at the day's end, the machines take initiative without Bob. While it is not the case in this specific story, generally whenever one of the machines sets out to do a task by itself, it fails or errs. The fact that the machines wait all day, however, before they take the initiative to complete their project delivers the message that members of the working class are in need of guidance and supervision. This again reflects the prevalent message also delivered by *Thomas & Friends* that workers who lack proper surveillance and discipline become slack and sometimes insubordinate, two conditions which are (re)presented as unacceptable for good neoliberal subjects of economy.

24. *Bob the Builder: Yes We Can!* (HIT Entertainment, 2004), DVD.
25. *Bob the Builder: Busy Bob and Silly Spud* (HIT Entertainment, 2001), VHS.
26. *Bob the Builder: Busy Bob and Silly Spud* (HIT Entertainment, 2001), VHS.
27. *Bob the Builder: Bob's Top Team* (HIT Entertainment, 2007), DVD.

In these and other ways, *Bob the Builder* encodes texts that reinforce the "work ethic," teaching children that working life is an immutable and impenetrable reality to be enjoyed so long as workers follow their natural calling in the system of production. *Bob the Builder*, like *Barney*, offers more in terms of ethnic and racial diversity than *Thomas*, though less than *Sesame Street*, but this again is not inconsistent with neoliberal ideology. Much as the social formation of capitalism has become more sophisticated than it had been in the 1980s, so too the ideological messages delivered through children's television have changed with the times.

## Conclusion: Situating Children's Television in Historical Shifts in the Social Formation of Capitalism

In this study, we see the texts encoded in more recent PBS shows as examples of changes in the ideological and political conditions of the capitalist class structure and in the social relations of production with the turn toward neoliberalism. Our focus on the political-economic context within which television programs are encoded provides a perspective that addresses what we see as weaknesses in the postmodern interpretation of children's television (Kraidy 2002). The three shows at the center of this study—*Thomas & Friends*, *Barney & Friends*, and *Bob the Builder*—were all adopted for television after the socioeconomic shift toward neoliberalism. *Thomas*, with its messages most strongly reflecting the interests of capital, debuted in the UK in 1984 when Margaret Thatcher was in her second term as prime minister. That year also marked the start of the yearlong UK miner's strike, which ended with Thatcher defeating one of the UK's strongest unions. Given the sociopolitical climate at the time *Thomas* was adopted for television, it is not surprising that this program provided conditions for the advancement of a neoliberal agenda that fostered the idea that workers are to be docile and obedient, key factors to the establishment of "flexible" labor markets. And this Thatcher did with the power of ideological coercion under the fatalistic assertion that there were no other alternatives (Harvey 2005, 40). Thatcher, like Reagan in the United States, advanced the notion that plant closings, diminished union power, and "flexible" labor markets were economic necessities, and she presented these ideas as *the only reality*—very similar overall to the relatively closed messages delivered on *Thomas & Friends*.

*Barney* and *Bob the Builder* first appeared on television in the 1990s. *Barney* debuted near the end of the Bush administration, just before the start of Clinton's presidency, while *Bob the Builder* began airing in the UK during the Blair years. Bush, Clinton, and Blair all advanced neoliberal agendas with emphasis on market supremacy. Downsizing, outsourcing, increased job insecurity, and social welfare spending cuts were all elements of Clinton's economic legacy, and despite economic growth that made the very rich become richer, roughly 46 percent of Americans were downwardly mobile in the 1990s (Newman 1999). At the start of the decade, despite rising productivity, Americans were working longer hours for less pay than they had been twenty years earlier, many working multiple jobs out of economic necessity, owing partially to growth in consumption (Schor 1991; Wolff 2005), a situation which was exacerbated throughout the 1990s. We see these political-economic conditions

reified in the characters Ms Kepler and Mr. Boyd in *Barney & Friends*. Working more for less is the new economic situation in the United States, which is presented in larger society very similarly to the way it is on *Barney*, as "just the way it is." Like Clinton, Blair was elected on promises of fostering compassion and understanding though in reality the income gap between rich and poor kept widening. Similarly, while there are few female characters on *Thomas* and no racial minorities, *Bob the Builder* (like *Barney*) has both and seems to embrace greater diversity, just as Blair promised, offering the vision of a "more caring Britain" than his predecessors offered. Yet both shows still advance certain neoliberal messages, reproaching too much creativity and "wasteful" leisure time.

But this reality, fatalistically labeled as the *only possibility*, does not have to be the sole option. Discursive moves that are antagonistic to capital are sometimes found in openings within the texts delivered by the culture industry, providing the basis for alternatives to be realized. Perhaps the current economic crisis and the ability of the Occupy Wall Street movement to change our political discourse will create the space and a demand for a new kind of children's show more like the *Sesame Street* of old and less like *Bob the Builder* and *Thomas*. By realizing the common ties that unite workers, as the diesel engines do in one episode of *Thomas & Friends*, children when they assume their adult roles within the social division of labor may recognize themselves as members of a class-for-itself, at odds with the neoliberal culture that glorifies work without end.



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