

***Seinfeld* and the American Sitcom as a Catalyst for Youth Socialist Values**

Mitch Herndon

*Cinema & Television Arts
Elon University*

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements in
an undergraduate senior capstone course in communications

Abstract

Seinfeld, a wildly popular sitcom broadcast in the 1990s, has been subject to countless reviews, explorations, and critiques—a testament to its far-reaching impact. Through humor, the sitcom often criticized capitalism and materialism, while also endorsing communality. This study examined the relationship between American sitcoms like Seinfeld and the recent rise in Marxist/socialist values among the millennial generation. It is hypothesized that sitcoms had a significant effect on their viewers, particularly in the realm of social class-consciousness and economic outlook. A literature review found emphasis on consumption and communality within the show, poor representation of accurate class structure in sitcoms, and a trend toward feelings of inequality as a result of cultivation theory.

I. Introduction

Seinfeld was a popular sitcom broadcast in the 1990s that continues to entertain countless people through syndication. The misadventures of Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer are as relatable as they are humorous, with Larry David's misanthropic take on life shining through in every episode. It has been subject to countless reviews, explorations, and critiques, which is a testament to its far-reaching impact and depth of content. A generation of American youths was raised watching *Seinfeld*, likely shaping the way they see the world around them. At its core, this study is meant to examine how the show has potentially influenced its viewers.

The author asked questions pertaining to capitalist critiques within the show, the nature of sitcoms as a whole, and how television affects viewers on a broader scale. Synthesizing that information presents an idea of how *Seinfeld* may have had an impact on its audience and the nature of the millennial inclination toward socialism as an ideology.

II. Research Method

To better understand the relationship between American sitcoms and class-consciousness, the author conducted an extensive literature review, gathering information from multiple sources on four main subjects. Given the nebulous nature of the hypothesis, it made the most sense to use the wealth of previous academic journal articles that pertain to the subjects, rather than employing a content analysis of *Seinfeld* episodes. Similarly, not much valuable information could have been gleaned from surveys or interviews.

The articles were divided into four subjects: Marxism, sitcoms, *Seinfeld*, and cultivation theory. Several of the Marxism articles were primary sources, written by Karl Marx himself, or pieces on the significance of the philosophy in modern America. These articles served as an educational backbone, making it easier to understand the criticisms of capitalism that are embedded in the show. The articles on sitcoms mostly dealt with class representation throughout the history of television, and whether or not it truly reflected the nature of American social class. Articles about *Seinfeld* were either commentaries on the deeper messages found within the show, or pieces that broke down what cultural and historical events led the show to take place. Finally, the articles on cultivation theory serve as validation of the linking factor: determining if television affects how viewers feel about capitalism and consumption.

To gather source information that was as reputable as possible, this study consulted mostly academic journals. Most were accessed via the Elon online library database, using resources such as JSTOR, Routledge, and Statista. From there, the author used permutations of keywords like “Marxism,” “*Seinfeld*,” “social class,” and “cultivation theory” to find congruent articles.

While this method was an efficient way to conduct the study, it was not without flaws. The lack of content analysis meant the show itself could not be directly evaluated for the themes in question. It would be certainly worthwhile to conduct a pure content analysis of *Seinfeld*, and pick through the show for capitalist criticisms.

III. Literature Review

Marxism

First, the current author reviewed Marxism, specifically the historical criticism of capitalism, and its echoes in America today. Historical writing on the subject abounds, with much of it coming from Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels themselves.

Marx and Engels’ foremost text on the philosophy, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), describes the historic class structure that guides all societies: an oppressive minority controlling the subjugated majority. They describe these forces as the bourgeoisie and the proletariat respectively, and explain that there has always been and always will be class conflict until a kinder structure is achieved (pp. 14-21). In Marx’s later work, particularly *Das Kapital vol. I*, he goes on to discuss the nature of commodity, labor, and value in the production process. This fundamental text exposes the holes in capitalism, an economic system that has remained nearly unchanged in America 150 years later (Marx, 1867). Most of Marx’s writing revolves around these critiques, which he applies to various historical events and scenarios. For instance, his essay *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* explains the French coup of 1851 through a materialist lens (Marx, 1852).

Any society, government, or event can be analyzed through Marxism. The practice has long outlived Marx himself and is as useful now as it was in the 1800s. That said, it is important to consider how things have changed since then. There is a difference between the traditional Marxist proletariat and the new middle class. While they share some similar aspects, such as not owning any of the property they work for, needing a salary to survive, and working for reasons that don’t relate directly to their home life, they are distinct (Barbalet, 1986, pg. 557). Although the proletariat did not rise up and overthrow the bourgeoisie in America, Marx’s class theory still holds water with some tweaks. Despite the prevailing notion of America being a country with high economic mobility and general prosperity, the social classes are incredibly stratified (Manley, 2003, pg. 9). In a 2016 essay, James Parisot describes the concept of a capitalist empire, where capitalism does not just affect the economy. Instead, it also dictates the politics, ideology, gender/race roles, and overarching ecology of a country (Parisot, 2016, pg. 29). It is safe to say that America fits the bill.

Seinfeld

Seinfeld is a popular American sitcom that ran for nine seasons from 1989 to 1999 and has remained in syndication since 1995 (Armstrong, 2016). The four main characters in the show spend episodes dealing with inconsequential happenings and events, which prompted its famous description: “a show about nothing.”

Although some call *Seinfeld* dangerously nihilistic, certain writers believe the show actually represented a trend toward more socially liberal values in the wake of the rigid conservatism of the 1980s (Olbrys, 2006). Other writers think the show’s characters constantly struggle with the social expectations of the American middle class. In a way, it shares some aspects with British “comedies of manners,” in that the main focus is on one’s behavior and fitting in (Pierson, 2001, pp. 49-50). The characters are assaulted by cultural norms and expectations while constantly trying to avoid them, always consuming, buying, and using. *Seinfeld* subverted the rosy trend of other sitcoms: lessons are not learned and people do not change (Morreale, 2005). The characters in the show often act in their own self-interest, yet this is all bound together with a sense of communality (Ben-Shaul, 2000). Everyone is in it for themselves, but friends support one another’s struggle to survive.

Sitcoms

After considering *Seinfeld* specifically, it becomes clear that the show is an outlier. To truly understand its place within the television environment, it is necessary to understand the traditional sitcom.

In American sitcoms immediately following World War II, there was the widespread concept that going to a menial, low-paying job every day meant your life would improve. Hard work would truly pay off (Watson, 2006, pg. 32). That has changed in recent years. While the working class is now barely represented in sitcoms, the current shows carry a different message. Sitcoms like *Roseanne* looked at the lower class as something to ascend from, but recent shows like *The Middle* treat poverty as a grim reality that will never be escaped (Grabowski, 2014, pg. 135). Paired with that, most sitcoms have bucked any real attachment to concepts of class. Characters live in big houses, experience no economic struggles, and never worry about their next paycheck; regardless of what job they hold (VanDerwerff, 2012). These “hangout shows” started with *Seinfeld* and become more and more popular over time. They feature groups of people with no clear economic or familial ties coasting through life, which ultimately creates a distorted perspective for viewers who expect the real world to function the same way (Morris, 2016).

Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theory is a mass communication theory that argues the link between heavy television viewership and altered worldviews (O’Guinn & Shrum, 1997). Particularly, American television has been shown to overemphasize affluence and the benefits of capitalism, typically highlighting material goods and wealth (Carlson, 1993). Luxury services and goods are typically considered to be much more prevalent than they actually are (Shrum, Burroughs, & Rindfleisch, 2005). As a result, this endorsement of capitalism and material wealth has had a negative effect on viewers. Audiences perceive larger gaps between their own social standing and others, which leads to unhappiness with economic inequality (Yang & Oliver, 2010, pp. 121-122).

With the prevalence of the internet today, people are subjected to cultivation theory not only from television, but also from all forms of new media. While it is not known specifically how the internet truly affects users’ worldviews, it can be assumed that it is significant (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2015).

IV. Discussion

Based on what was discovered in the literature review, there is a possible, tenuous relationship between sitcoms like *Seinfeld* and the increase in socialist values among millennials. The show itself contains various messages that promote communality and deride materialism. Along with that, sitcoms may have created an inaccurate picture of life in America, leading to dissatisfaction with the current state of the social class. Finally, television viewership appears to be tied to awareness of economic inequality as a whole, which might be serving as a spur for these sociopolitical movements.

Marxist Undertones in Seinfeld

Seinfeld is a decidedly apolitical show. It makes few references to the politics or current events of its time, which likely contributes to its timelessness (Olbrys, 2006, pg. 391). However, specks of a message peek through. At its core, Marxism is a critique of capitalism, and there are several instances in the show when capitalism is painted in a harsh light.

The characters in the show are caught up in their own self-absorption. They constantly buy, consume, and show off (Pierson, 2001, pp. 50-51). But these actions are never glorified. They almost always result in disappointment or failure, leaving the characters right where they started. For example, in one episode George spends days guarding a suit in a store so he can buy the item when it goes on sale. But when he finally purchases the suit, he discovers that the pants make a whooshing sound. This small issue ultimately costs him a potential job (David, 1994b). Instead of leading to positive outcomes, George's greed and desire to buy results in a complete reversal of fortune. This story structure is repeated many times over the show's nine seasons; different characters pursue their own materialist goals, but are always penalized in the end. Consumption is not portrayed in a positive light within *Seinfeld*, to humorously absurd extents.

Although they all work toward their own interests, there is a tangible sense of communality within the show. While Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer are often at odds with one another, they form a support unit outside of the traditional familial structure (Olbrys, 2006, pg. 390). Take, for instance, Kramer's constant mooching from Jerry. Although it is meant to be comedic, there is an obvious communal relationship. Along with that, the core of the show's conflicts typically stems from the characters' desire to subvert cultural norms. They are not content to conform to the prevailing concepts of family or what is expected of an individual in their thirties. This could be seen as indicative of a broader progressive trend in America during the 1990s, but it was also a unique perspective to see on television (Olbrys, 2006, 392).

In summation, *Seinfeld* repeatedly criticizes capitalism and materialism, while also endorsing communality. The characters' obsession with consumption can be taken as a jab at the American experience, while their reliance on one another can be considered as support for a new system that embraces cooperation, rather than competition.

Social Class in American Sitcoms

Sitcoms have traditionally attempted to serve as a comedic reflection of the American experience. However, they have not always been accurate. While past decades saw a wider range of sitcoms from various economic classes, the scope of representation has shrunk consistently and significantly (Grabowski, 2014). Shows like *Good Times* (1974-1979), which focused on working-class families struggling to stay above water, have been all but eliminated. Poverty is largely glazed over on television, even though it remains a grim reality for a significant proportion of Americans. The few of these shows that exist currently have a different message than they did in the past. Instead of touting the power of hard work and America's social mobility, they have taken a more fatalist tone. Poverty is declared inescapable, and working-class characters are encouraged to accept that their situations will never improve (Watson, 2006, pg. 39). This attitude says a lot about America's current economic climate. The promise of the American dream has been replaced with lowered expectations. The government and media seem to largely ignore working-class families, which make up an increasing proportion of the American population ("American Middle Class," 2015). These people are getting less and less representation on television, which can only serve to make them feel more out of place and irrelevant.

Seinfeld served as a catalyst for another important trend in sitcoms over the past few decades. Along with the disappearance of the working class came the distortion of the middle class. Likely due to the popularity of *Seinfeld's* breezy, economically carefree atmosphere, more and more sitcoms began to feature characters that live in worlds where money is no issue, regardless of income or profession (Morris, 2016). *Cheers* and *Friends* are two prime examples. Writers realized that removing the real-world stress of making ends meet usually made for shows that were easier to watch, despite being unrealistic portrayals of American life. The concept is attractive to viewers: worlds where money is no issue. However, this creates a mindset that is not reflective of reality. An individual who only watched sitcoms before venturing off into the world on their own would be incredibly surprised to find that life is not as simple as it is on *Seinfeld*. The interpersonal issues surely exist, but so do money problems. It is possible that the generation that grew up watching shows like *Seinfeld* feel cheated. They were fed a vision that does not exist, and now they want to rectify that.

Youth Socialism and Cultivation Theory

The American political landscape has been changing fast in recent years. Specifically, young people are showing the signs of creating a major shift. Study after study has shown millennials are subverting the trends of generations before them. The marriage rate has been steadily plummeting since the early 1990s, indicating a change from the traditional familial structure that dominated past decades (NCHS, 2016). Millennials are not worried about buying a house either, with nearly 25% not expecting it within five years (*USA Today*, 2017). Most importantly, they are more socialist than any other generation or age group. In 2016, 33% of millennials support socialism as a personal sociopolitical ideology (Harvard Institute of Politics, 2016). Furthermore, 45% supported Bernie Sanders in the 2016 presidential election (Loesche, 2016).

So where is this groundswell of youth socialist values coming from? Television might be the answer. Historically, television has had a tremendous effect on viewers' perception of affluence and material wealth. One study from the early 1990s found that heavy television viewing increased audiences' perception of American affluence and their support for capitalism, but that appears to have changed in recent years (Carlson, 1993, pg. 243). A 2010 study shows that watching television ultimately decreases life satisfaction and highlights economic inequality (Yang & Oliver, 2010). This is a major shift.

It is not easy to say whether or not it has contributed to millennial socialist values, but it cannot be discounted as a factor. Maybe sitcoms have provided young people with an image of American life that is not at all accurate, and they feel swindled. Socialism could be an attempt to level the playing field somewhat for all American families, with the goal of everyone being able to experience the stress-free fantasy of Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer.

Limitations of Research and Future Suggestions

As stated earlier, this study is not meant to be a content analysis. It is an extensive literature review that seeks to make conclusions based on previous writing on the subject. As such, not much space is devoted to specific examples of socialist values that might be present in the show. A study based on that particular goal would be a valuable addition to this study and could support the findings.

V. Conclusion

This study sought to understand the connections between the growing support for socialism among the millennial generation and American sitcoms like *Seinfeld*. The show has hints of capitalist critiques, namely the denigration of consumerism along with an emphasis on communality as the correct path. The portrayal of social class not only in *Seinfeld*, but also in many sitcoms is contrary to the actual nature of class in America. They glaze over issues of poverty and income with the intent to provide a more comfortable viewing experience, distorting the reality that all Americans face. Lastly, it is shown that television viewing affects audiences significantly, often leading to dissatisfaction with affluence and equality. Television could easily be a facilitator of the growing push for socialism in America, with more and more Americans becoming fed up with the current capitalist ecosystem.

Acknowledgments

This author is thankful to Byung Lee, associate professor at Elon University, for his supervision and advice, without which the article could not be published.

References

- The American Middle Class Is Losing Ground. (2015, December 09). Retrieved May 01, 2017, from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/12/09/the-american-middle-class-is-losing-ground/>
- Armstrong, J. K. (2016). *Seinfeldia: how a show about nothing changed everything*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Barbalet, J. (1986). Limitations of Class Theory and the Disappearance of Status: The Problem of the New Middle Class. *Sociology*, 20(4), 557-575. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42854341>
- Ben - Shaul, N. (2000). Different yet even: The effacement of power in poststructuralism. *Third Text*, 14(51), 75-84. doi:10.1080/09528820008576855
- Carlson, J. M. (1993). Television viewing: Cultivating perceptions of affluence and support for capitalist values. *Political Communication*, 10(3), 243-257. doi:10.1080/10584609.1993.9962982
- David, L. (Writer), Seinfeld, J. (Writer) & Ackerman, A. (Director). (1994a). The Race [Television series episode]. In L. David (Producer), *Seinfeld*. Los Angeles, CA: Shapiro/West Productions.
- David, L. (Writer), Seinfeld, J. (Writer) & Ackerman, A. (Director). (1994b). The Pie [Television series episode]. In L. David (Producer), *Seinfeld*. Los Angeles, CA: Shapiro/West Productions.
- Grabowski, M. (2014). Resignation and Positive Thinking in the Working-Class Family Sitcom. *Atlantic Journal of Communication*, 22(2), 124-137. doi:10.1080/15456870.2013.842573
- Harvard Institute of Politics. (2016). Opinion poll on which sociopolitical ideologies U.S. millennials support as of 2016. In *Statista - The Statistics Portal*. Retrieved April 26, 2017, from <https://www.statista.com.ezproxy.elon.edu/statistics/540897/support-for-sociopolitical-ideologies-among-us-millennials/>
- Loesche, D. (2016, February 29). Infographic: Political Attitudes of the Snapchat Generation. Retrieved May 01, 2017, from <https://www.statista.com/chart/4430/super-tuesday-young-us-voters/>
- Manley, J. (2003). Marx in America: The New Deal. *Science & Society*, 67(1), 9-38. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40404049>
- Marx, K. (1867). *Capital: a critique of political economy* (Vol. 1). London: Penguin.
- Marx, K. (1852). *The eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, with explanatory notes*. New York, NY: International.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1848). *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. New York: International.
- Morgan, M., Shanahan, J., & Signorielli, N. (2015). Yesterday's New Cultivation, Tomorrow. *Mass Communication and Society*, 18(5), 674-699. doi:10.1080/15205436.2015.1072725
- Morreale, J. (2000). Sitcoms Say Goodbye: The Cultural Spectacle of Seinfeld's Last Episode. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 28(3), 108-115. doi:10.1080/01956050009602830
- Morris, W. (2016, April 27). TV's Dwindling Middle Class. Retrieved March 15, 2017, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/01/magazine/tvs-dwindling-middle-class.html>
- NCHS. (2016). Marriage rate in the United States from 1990 to 2014 (per 1,000 of population). In *Statista - The Statistics Portal*. Retrieved April 26, 2017, from <https://www.statista.com.ezproxy.elon.edu/statistics/195951/marriage-rate-in-the-united-states-since-1990/>
- O'Guinn, T., & Shrum, L. (1997). The Role of Television in the Construction of Consumer Reality. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 23(4), 278-294. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2489565>
- Olbrys, S. G. (2005). Seinfeld's Democratic Vistas. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 22(5), 390-408. doi:10.1080/07393180500342969
- Parisot, J. (2016). What Is, and What Is Not, A Capitalist Empire. *International Critical Thought*, 6(1), 29-45. doi:10.1080/21598282.2016.1142387
-

- Pierson, D. P. (2000), A Show about Nothing: Seinfeld and the Modern Comedy of Manners. *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 34: 49–64. doi:10.1111/j.0022-3840.2000.3401_49.x
- Shrum, L., Burroughs, J., & Rindfleisch, A. (2005). Television's Cultivation of Material Values. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32(3), 473-479. doi:10.1086/497559
- USA Today. (2017). When do Millennials expect to buy a home?. In *Statista - The Statistics Portal*. Retrieved April 26, 2017, from <https://www.statista.com.ezproxy.elon.edu/statistics/654103/expected-timeline-for-buying-a-home-according-to-millennials/>.
- VanDerWerff, T. (2012, October 02). Where are all the blue-collar sitcoms? Retrieved March 15, 2017, from <http://www.avclub.com/article/where-are-all-the-blue-collar-sitcoms-85978>
- Watson, M. A. (2006). Hard Work Always Pays Off: Jobs, Families, and the Evolution of a TV Myth. *Television Quarterly*, 36(3/4), 32-39.
- Yang, H., & Oliver, M. B. (2010). Exploring the Effects of Television Viewing on Perceived Life Quality: A Combined Perspective of Material Value and Upward Social Comparison. *Mass Communication and Society*, 13(2), 118-138. doi:10.1080/15205430903180685