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Analyzing *South Park*’s Conservative Bias in a Politically Polarized
United States

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Abstract

South Park is a TV show which is both commercial and subversive. The show exists as a part of, and also because of, a dominant culture which it continuously questions and critiques. The aim of this thesis is to analyze the conservative bias in *South Park*'s portrayal of a politically polarized nation and associating the results with the increasingly polarized political reality of the US. This thesis attempts to concretely examine the critique and circulation of ideologies in *South Park* through analyzing language strategies and socio-political contexts. By doing so, this paper acknowledges the essential pragmatic role of popular media in shaping political debates and ideologies in the American public.

South Park has often been mistaken for an inherently conservative TV show. Yet, the show is politically ambiguous, holding the mirror of satire up to both competing political camps. *South Park*'s incredible intertextuality and bold recontextualization of competing discourses make it an effective reflection of a divided nation. Taking a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) perspective, this study analyzes the textual data, selected *South Park* episodes, from three main aspects: textual features, pragmatic functions, and socio-political contexts. The texts are analyzed as a part of their discursive network and are interpreted from multiple perspectives.

The main interest lies in politically polarizing conflicts and the way they are played out on *South Park*'s predominantly conservative small stage. *South Park* mirrors the geographical trends which emphasize the American nation's partisan polarization. *South Park*'s townspeople display this hyper-ideological extremism which leads to the increasing bimodal distribution of ideologies. polarization makes an appearance as soon as political views influence individuals' interpersonal perceptions. Another factor contributing to polarization is political factions disagreeing on multiple issues at a time, generating conflict extension. Moral panic is another phenomenon which forwards polarizing discussions and increases public concern and hostility. Altogether, *South Park* produces social reality through discourse and the reproduction of cultural narratives. The results of this paper can be utilized by historians, cultural scientists and media scholars alike. They help gain a better understanding of the evolving conservative ideology and its increasing appeal. Also, the phenomenon of two ideologies drifting farther apart is worth closer investigation.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, ideology, conservatism, affective polarization, moral panic, cultural narrative.

Abstract (German)

South Park ist eine zugleich kommerzielle und subversive US-amerikanische Fernsehserie. Die Serie ist Teil einer dominanten Kultur, welche sie unentwegt kritisiert und in Frage stellt. Das Ziel dieser Arbeit ist, *South Parks* konservative Ausrichtung in seiner Darstellung einer politisch polarisierten Nation zu analysieren und die Ergebnisse mit der zunehmend polarisierten, politisch extremen Realität der USA in Verbindung zu setzen. Durch Analyse des „Sprachgebrauchs“ und des gesellschaftspolitischen Kontextes in *South Park* untersucht diese Arbeit die Kritik und Verbreitung von Ideologien in der Fernsehserie. Hierbei erkennt diese Arbeit die wesentliche pragmatische Bedeutung von Massenmedien im Formen politischer Debatten und Ideologien in der amerikanischen Öffentlichkeit an.

South Park wurde bereits mehrmals für eine von Grund auf konservative Serie gehalten. Jedoch hält *South Park* beiden rivalisierenden politischen Lagern den Spiegel der Satire vor und wird dadurch zu einem politisch mehrdeutigen Medium. *South Park* reflektiert eine gesplante Nation durch seine Intertextualität und kühne Rekontextualisierung konkurrierender Diskurse. Mit Hilfe der Techniken der Kritischen Diskursanalyse durchleuchtet diese Arbeit textliches Datenmaterial – ausgewählte *South Park*-Folgen – anhand dreier Hauptgesichtspunkte: textliche Merkmale, pragmatische Funktion und gesellschaftspolitischer Kontext. Die Texte werden als Teile ihres diskursiven Netzwerks und aus unterschiedlichen Perspektiven analysiert. Das Hauptinteresse liegt in politisch polarisierenden Konflikten und der Art, wie sie in *South Park* im Kleinen ausgetragen werden.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass *South Park* die geographischen Tendenzen widerspiegelt, welche die Polarisierung Amerikas verdeutlichen. In *South Park* zeigt sich der hyper-ideologische Extremismus, der zu einer fortschreitenden bimodalen Verteilung der Ideologien führt. Sobald politische Ansichten zwischenmenschliche Wahrnehmung verändern, spricht man von „affektiver Polarisierung“. Ein weiterer Gesichtspunkt, der zur Polarisierung beiträgt, ist eine Erweiterung der Konflikte auf mehrere Streitpunkte zugleich. Moralische Panik ist ein weiteres Phänomen, welches polarisierende Diskussionen vorantreibt und öffentliche Besorgnis und Feindseligkeiten verstärkt. *South Park* erschafft soziale Realität durch Diskurs und die Reproduktion kultureller Narrative. Die Ergebnisse der Arbeit sind für Geschichts-, Kultur- und Medienwissenschaftler gleichermaßen interessant, da sie ein besseres Verständnis der sich ausbreitenden konservativen Ideologie und ihrer wachsenden Attraktivität begünstigen. Außerdem verdient die politische Polarisierung mit zwei immer weiter auseinanderdriftenden Ideologien genauere Erforschung.

Schlagwörter: Kritische Diskursanalyse, Ideologie, Konservatismus, affektive Polarisierung, moralische Panik, kulturelles Narrativ.

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CHAPTER I: Introduction

“Our nation is divided like never before” (S20E1). *South Park*’s observation at the beginning of its 2016 season hits the bull’s eye. The American nation is indeed more ideologically divided than just a generation ago (see Abramowitz 2015, Galston & Nivola 2006). Political ideologies now appear to be bimodally distributed, instead of aligning on the classic left-to-right continuum. Of all things, it is the radically oppositional TV show *South Park* which poses as a mediative model in this increasingly polarized political environment. Even though *South Park* is set in a predominantly conservative and secluded mountain town, it holds the mirror of satire up to both extreme political camps.

1.1. Epistemological Interest

My aim in this paper is to examine the multiple ways in which *South Park* interacts with contemporary ideology. My interest in the subject grows partly from my personal engagement with popular culture and my concern with contemporary right-drifting politics around the globe. *South Park* is a TV show I have always enjoyed watching in my spare time. With the progress of my history studies, I grew steadily aware of the show’s socio-critical implications. As an avid consumer of different popular media, I observed *South Park*’s idiosyncrasy when compared to other contemporary popular TV shows. Accordingly, I see *South Park* as a site where dominant meanings are produced, affirmed, and circulated, but at the same time also attacked, criticized, and negotiated. *South Park* is restricted to the discursive realm as it primarily focuses on the media and its portrayals of reality (Gournelos 2009: 207). Events like Katrina, environmental degradation, globalization etc. are rarely discussed in and of themselves. Instead, *South Park* criticizes media constructions, discourse, and rhetoric. Consequently, rather than criticizing a policy decision, *South Park* concentrates on the ways in which the events are represented and understood (Gournelos 2009: 207). The representation of media discourse leads to a blurring of the socio-political realities involved and evokes the often politically ambivalent message of the series. Although *South Park* has often been referred to as an antiliberal and conservative show,¹ the traditional conservative ideology is continuously critiqued and subtly satirized. The show’s rendering of conservatism gains central significance in the light of political polarization.

In the context of the omnipresence and successes of conservative beliefs especially in contemporary American politics, I was prompted to investigate conservatism’s shapes in popular media and the phenomenon of growing political polarization. Research on how conservatism and

¹ Anderson (2005: 75) on *South Park*: “while being far from traditionally conservative, it still is fiercely anti-liberal”. Anderson adds that *South Park* would be the number-one example of a newly emerging anti-liberalism (2005: 75).

political polarization are portrayed in popular media such as TV series would yield new insights not only for political science but also for history and sociology. Au fond, there is a considerable amount of literature on conservatism and on polarized politics generally. Yet, these works mostly date back to the second half of the 20th century. Apart from that, these works are largely written by self-proclaimed conservatives, which is, to me, a somewhat alarming fact. In the last few years however, ongoing changes in the American political culture have increased the interest in underlying mechanisms. Two presidencies after Obama was first elected, the American political landscape is again exposed to tremendous transformation. Still, the different manifestations of conservatism in popular media culture have generally been overlooked by historians and political scientists. Likewise, the TV show *South Park* only has a comparatively small place in printed discourse so far - smaller than one might expect from a popular production like this one, continuously capitalizing on disputed issues and cultural controversies. It should be acknowledged that *South Park* has already been investigated from philosophy's and sociology's angle. However, almost all this work on *South Park* only focusses on its first ten seasons and, so far, no critic has examined the show's role as a satirical mirror for both political camps. Therefore, it remains relevant to look at *South Park* from multiple perspectives, especially with a contemporary focus. I claim that *South Park* engages with contemporary culture and society from within. This engagement is highlighted through the comedic modes employed in the show. I agree with Curtis & Erion (2007: 112) that, at first glance, *South Park* appears to "offer little more than crude animation and tasteless jokes expressed with a juvenile and offensive vulgarity". Yet, upon closer examination, there is more to the show. Cantor (2007: 98) brings those peculiarities face to face, stating that *South Park* is the most vulgar and yet most philosophical show ever to appear on television.

The results I expect from my research include an increased reflective look on the various facets of polarized and polarizing politics. I also intend to broaden the understanding of the evolving conservative ideology and its increasing appeal. Moreover, I want to highlight the political potential of a popular TV show. Yet, the main objective of my research is to deconstruct the conservative bias in the politically polarized *South Park* microcosm through the retroductable investigation of semiotic data. My paper relies on textual analyses of the visual and spoken data in *South Park* to illustrate the political potential of cultural products. Further, this study will explore how *South Park* reflects the polarization of US American politics. This study holds that *South Park*'s exceptional satire can be understood in relation to its mimesis of contemporary ideology. Therefore, the textual and pragmatic analysis of *South Park*'s episodes is combined with wider consideration of the socio-political context of both liberal and conservative politics. My

work stands out by its focused analysis of *South Park*'s latest seasons. It also pioneers holistic contrastive analysis of political satire of both liberal and conservative standpoints.

1.2. Methodology

To achieve my objectives, I employ the Critical Discourse Studies approach. The purpose of this chapter is to delineate the applied research approach. First, I will introduce the paradigm employed in this paper. I will focus on reasons for choosing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), on the method's implications, on the meaning of discourse, on the role of popular culture in the reproduction of ideology, and of the TV show *South Park*'s cultural relevance. Next, I will give you an overview of my research design and the process of data collection. Then, I would like to share my analytical strategy with you. As I use an interpretative method, I will as a last point reflect on my role as a researcher.

To begin with I would like to outline my main motives for choosing Critical Discourse Analysis as my research instrument. First and foremost, my research methodology is oriented alongside Wodak's understanding of Critical Discourse Studies (Wodak 1996, Wodak & Meyer 2016). The decision for this approach was incited by the shared interest in social processes of political power and hegemonic ideology, also key elements of Critical Discourse Studies. In my research, I concentrate on discourse as a tool of hegemonial power. Discourse has the power to reproduce hegemony through permanently producing consensus, acceptance and legitimacy of power structures (Van Dijk 2001: 302; Mayer, Wodak 2009: 8). Accordingly, I assume that even the smallest part of discourse has the power to create reality. I orient myself towards the aims of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as defined by De Cillia, Liebhart, Reisigl and Wodak (2009: 8). According to them, the aims of CDA are to uncover entrenched ideologies and partially obscured structures of dominance, power and political control. Beyond that, I am keen on investigating the strategies of discriminatory inclusion and exclusion in the use of language. Phillips and Hardy (2002: 12) express the idea that language is much more than a simple reflection of reality. According to them, language is in fact a constitutive of social reality. Based on this presumption, I also seek to analyze the dynamics of reality construction through language in *South Park*. Phillips and Hardy (2002: 13) also emphasize another asset of CDA. They criticize traditional methodologies which often reify categories, "making them seem natural and enduring" instead of helping the researcher understand how these categories came to life and what holds them in place. By way of contrast, Phillips and Hardy (2002: 13) are convinced that Critical Discourse Analysis "provides a way of analysing the dynamics of social construction that produce these categories and hold the boundaries around them in place". All things considered, CDA's interest

for hegemonial power and the focus on the constitutive function of language make CDA an appropriate method for my project.

I will now outline the method's rationale. As maintained by Titscher et. al. (2000: 144), CDA is 'critical' in two senses: "one sense is based on the ideas of the Frankfurt school (in particular the work of Jürgen Habermas) and the other on a shared tradition with so-called critical linguistics". They refer to Habermas' and Halliday's schools of thought as the theoretical basis for CDA (Titscher et. al. 2000: 144). Weiss and Wodak (2003: 12) hold onto the assertion that CDA cannot be viewed as a holistic paradigm. They stress that CDA has "never been and has never attempted to be or to provide one single or specific theory, and one specific methodology is not characteristic of research in CDA." On the contrary, they claim, CDA is a multifarious approach as studies in CDA are derived from different theoretical backgrounds and oriented towards very different data (Weiss & Wodak 2003: 12). Regarding this multifariousness, Phillips and Hardy (2002: 16) see discourse analysis as an "important contribution to increasing plurality in research". They applaud CDA for being "a way to incorporate the linguistic turn and to study new phenomena and practices, as well as to reinvigorate agendas of critical theory" (Phillips & Hardy 2002: 16). In addition, CDA makes a substantial contribution to innovation in social sciences. Social sciences, according to Phillips and Hardy (2002: 12) are not only about "counting, defining and measuring variables and the relationships between them – they are also about interpreting what social relationships signify".

This leads me to the next question: What is (a) discourse? Titscher et.al. (2000: 25) claim that Foucault has not been the only one who has come across the many meanings of 'discourse'. They explain that the notion of discourse, in both the popular and the philosophical usage of the term, combines a cluster of different meanings that sometimes even seem to be mutually exclusive or contradictory (Titscher et. al. 2000: 25). I will therefore confine myself to the meanings that are applicable to the objectives of my study. One of the more recent definitions of discourse is Fairclough's. Fairclough (2003: 124) sees discourses "as ways of representing aspects of the world". He adds that discourses "not only represent the world as it is (or rather is seen to be), they are also projective, imaginaries, representing possible worlds which are different from the actual world, and tied in to projects to change the world in particular directions" (Fairclough 2003: 124). Different discourses are different representations of the world, and any text entails such different representations. These representations, therefore discourses, can complement one another, compete with one another, and dominate others (Fairclough 2003: 124). Fairclough (2003: 126) adds that discourses create nodal points in the relationship between language and other elements of the social. Wodak (1996: 17-20) has a similar take on the meaning of discourse. To her, there is a dialectical relationship between society and culture, and discourse: while discourse shapes

society and culture, discourse is constituted at the same time. She adds that “[e]very single instance of language use reproduces or transforms society and culture, including power relations” (Wodak 1996: 17-20). Weiss and Wodak (2003: 15) state that power concerns relations of difference, in particular the effects of difference in social structures. Power is, next to ideology, hierarchy, gender and sociological variables, a notion that Weiss and Wodak (2003: 12) see relevant for the interpretation or explanation of a text. CDA research specifically considers the relations of struggle in the abovementioned domains. In addition, texts are often sites of struggle as they involve different discourses and differing ideologies struggling for dominance (Weiss & Wodak 2003: 15). Another central concept in CDA, and in my work too, is ideology. According to Weiss and Wodak (2003: 14) the term ‘ideology’, for CDA, is an important means of creating and retaining unequal power relations. Weiss and Wodak (2003: 14) declare that a particular interest of CDA is to investigate the ways in which language mediates ideology. Ryan (2016: 128) adds that Foucault and others turned ideology into a “suspect category” for everyone who followed them. Foucault rejected “the one-way flow of power implied in the Marxist conception of ideology and instead [saw] it as an altogether more diffuse permeation of social practices and embodiments” (Ryan 2016: 128). The idea of ideology as a permeable concept justifies my claim that *South Park* interacts with contemporary ideology and renegotiates ideology at the same time.

For CDA, this conception of interaction is crucial. An interdiscursive analysis of texts, as Fairclough (2003: 128) sums up, seeks to identify which discourses are drawn upon, and how these discourses are articulated together. In order to address these interactions, there are different ways to differentiate discourses. According to Fairclough (2003: 133), discourses can be distinguished in terms of semantic relations (synonymy, hyponymy, antonymy), collocations, assumptions, and different grammatical features. Furthermore, Fairclough (2003: 129) states that in textual analysis we identify the main parts of the world which are represented, the so-called ‘themes’. In addition, the researcher identifies the particular perspective or angle from which those themes are represented. Weiss and Wodak (2003) advocate an expansion of this approach. In the discourse-historical approach the pure linguistic dimension should be transcended. In their view, historical, political, sociological and psychological dimensions should be included in the analysis and interpretation (Weiss & Wodak 2003: 22). Another tactic Weiss and Wodak (2003: 21) encourage is triangulation. Triangulation is “one methodical way for critical discourse analysts to minimize the risk of critical baseness and to avoid simply politicizing instead of accurately analysing”. As a result, I consider it of importance to work interdisciplinarily, multimethodically and based on a variety of background information. In addition, it is imperative to always see a text in its attached discursive network; in its historical, political and socio-political situation.

This insight leads me to the role of popular culture for Critical Discourse Analysis. Due to the fact that cultural texts can be interpreted in multiple different ways, Schulzke (2016: 944) observes that it is difficult to link popular media to causal mechanisms. These multiple interpretations depend on the audience. As Schulzke (2016: 944) sums up: “Media don’t just influence people”. He explains that media are rather received by people with existing ideological biases, shaping their interpretations and determining the significance of media. Schulzke (2016: 944) therefore demands an openness to multiple interpretations for mapping the political landscape of popular media. Ryan (2016: 128) highlights another peculiarity of popular culture: “popular cultural forms produce a sense of the real by not ‘calling attention to themselves as articulation’ — hiding their artifice”. Ryan also acknowledges the determined nature of popular culture which requires an “investigation of the way they might manifest (or conceal) the reproduction of ideological acquiescence” (Ryan 2016: 127). For these reasons, regarding popular culture, a mere analysis of aesthetic forms would be useless, according to Ryan (2016: 127). Popular culture thrives on its contemporary relatedness and topicality. According to Schulzke (2016), popular culture often assumes the role of an information source. The example Schulzke refers to is popular media’s approach to threats. Schulzke (2016: 931) claims that even when the threats have concrete manifestations, they may still not be fully understood and provoke limitless speculation. Popular culture intercedes in this informational vacuum regarding the existence and manifestation of threats. In this way, popular culture provides some sense of certainty, real or imagined, that there are clear answers to security risks (Schulzke 2016: 931). To me, *South Park* is to be credited with this pseudo-informational function. The show has a crossover potential, producing social reality through discourse. I assume that while *South Park* exists as a part and product of a dominant culture, it simultaneously questions and critiques the culture which it is a part of (cf. Meyer 2015: 21).

With this in mind, I will now outline *South Park*’s cultural significance. When compared to other popular TV shows, *South Park*’s unique production techniques allow it to be exceptionally topical. As a computer animated show, changes can be made the night before airing, and episodes can be completed in one week (Becker 2008: 149). Also, as Parker and Stone are pretty much at liberty to realize their ideas, the show can respond to real-life events almost in real time (Becker 2008: 149). Beyond that, Gournelos (2009: 31-32) stresses *South Park*’s ambiguity concerning its concrete ideological orientation (being alternatively “reactionary, conservative, liberal progressive, or radically progressive”). This ambiguity allows the show to address cultural questions usually silenced within “normative “common sense” frameworks”. As *South Park* does not carry the banner of one political position, Gournelos (2009: 31-32) disputes all compliance with such positions. Becker (2008: 148) also sees the show as neither antiliberal nor

anticonservative. Instead, he claims it would be antipolitical. Becker justifies his claim by saying that *South Park*'s makers Parker and Stone belong to Generation X. And, according to Becker (2008: 148), the members of Generation X generally share a feeling of disenfranchisement, irony, apathy, and cynicism toward political institutions. My impression is that the show's own ideology is apparently not overt. The show conceals potentially critical political viewpoints under the guise of *South Park*'s hegemonic conservatism. For Gournelos (2009: 199), it is humour and irony that affirm the show's political ambivalence. Gournelos (2009: 11) also suggests that *South Park* can be understood as a new form of cultural politics in the media where the future of opposition lies in an overall strategy of conflict. He further on calls the show "an inspiration, a precursor, or a cultural buffer that allows [Parker and Stone] to make transgressive statements on mainstream television" (Gournelos 2009: 31). Gournelos (2009: 199) also emphasizes *South Park*'s great potential as "an oppositional, subversive, radically progressive, or critically pedagogical set of (inter)texts". All in all, *South Park* cannot be dismissed as an insignificant entertainment show. It produces a sense of reality.

Over the past two decades, the political significance of popular media has gained political scientists' and scholars of other disciplines' attention (Schulzke 2016: 932). *South Park* roughly went with the flow, with an article by Michael A. Chaney (2004 ²) and Brian C. Anderson's monograph "South Park Conservatives" (2005) being the first two academic publications on the TV show. Since that time, the publications on *South Park* had broad-ranging views on the show's implications, in particular with regard to US party politics. That is why I set out to investigate *South Park* from an unprecedented vantage point and analyse how the show, as a cultural medium, operates in the polarized interplay of two major ideologies. Titscher et. al. (2000: 12) claim: „Every purposeful observation presupposes a *decision about what one wishes to observe*" (original emphasis). This is also why I "took up" my research with an explicit objective in mind. The "decision about what one wishes to observe" distinguishes scientific research from chance discoveries.

As mentioned above, the architecture of my project supports my research interest. I seek to create awareness of the interconnectedness of the various units in discourse. Moreover, the project intends to reveal hidden structures of language with an emphasis on the role of hegemonic power. The data collection has been a step-by-step process. First, I concentrated on the socio-political context and determined the direction of my research. Next, I assembled my corpus of samples and in the process narrowed the sample size to the three most current *South Park* seasons. As a result, the units of inquiry for this paper are the three to date latest seasons, season nineteen, twenty, and

² Chaney, Michael A. 2004. "Coloring Whiteness and Blackvoice Minstrelsy. Representations of Race and Place in Static Shock, King of the Hill, and South Park". *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 31(4), 167-175.

twenty-one. In addition, I analyse supplementary selected *South Park* episodes from prior seasons. The individual units of analysis are the multiple manifestations of conservatism in *South Park*, including nostalgia, anti-liberal rhetoric, and the most heated issue positions of *South Park* conservatives. The variables, collected by means of content analysis, are indicators of entrenched conservative ideology, linguistic expressions supporting ideological orientation, indicators of affective polarization amongst *South Park*'s ³ population.

The data gathered from the examined episodes will be organized according to their textual core content. Therefore, the paper is not chronologically but logically structured. Each chapter comprises the analysis of relevant *South Park* text material and supporting arguments that create a nexus to America's socio-political reality. Each analysis sequence takes place in a tripartite structure. On the outermost level, the description stage focusses on the visible elements of the text. Next, the textual elements undergo interpretative procedures. Conclusively, the explanation stage considers the wider social context and asks for the reproductive effects and consequences of the above representations. Moreover, the analysis of the samples is also carried out at both macro and micro discourse levels. At the macro discourse level, the actions and interests of a group and the setting of the entire town are foregrounded. Salient speech patterns are chosen for obtaining insights into the reforming ideology of conservatives in modern socio-political settings. At the micro discourse level, I focus on individual identities and shorter interaction times and turns (see Van Dijk 2007: 10). I analyse how the aspects of textual features and pragmatic functions in *South Park*'s intimate interactions circulate and negotiate ideology. I also pay attention to conversational maxims. Combining discourse features at the macro and the micro levels, this study maintains that *South Park* takes a mediative position in a politically polarized environment. The TV show plays an essential role in delivering and negotiating political ideologies to a significant segment of the American public. ⁴

Especially due to the interpretative nature of CDA I am very conscious about the impact my role as a researcher has on the research. Self-reflection and reflexivity over the research process are paramount to mitigate potential pitfalls. By applying an interpretative approach, I aim at understanding the phenomena in question in a holistic, comprehensive way. My primary intention is to decode the textual meaning. Therefore, all my interpretations are aimed to be conducted in a straightforward and retroductable way. I am aware that my method relies on subjective knowledge, that is why I strive for careful examination of the variables. In order to make my analyses more than a subjective impression, I rigorously applied the theoretically grounded method of CDA. I

³ *South Park* in italics refers to the TV show, written in the text body type it refers to South Park, the fictional town.

⁴ For instance, season 21 of *South Park* attracted an average of 1.153 million viewers per episode in the 18-49 demographic range on Comedy Central (The Nielsen Company 2017).

appreciate that many readings are possible in every analysis sequence. That my research is exclusively qualitative is a potential shortcoming. Resultingly, in the knowledge of my own preconceived notions, I try to ground my analysis in the textual interaction itself, in what is relevant to the participants in these interactions.

1.3. Guiding Questions and Structure

My research was guided by three central questions of manner: How is the polarization of US American politics reflected in the popular TV show *South Park*? How are polarizing political conflicts played out on *South Park*'s predominantly conservative small stage? And, how does the show satirically deal with the ever more extreme political reality?

Two major theses channelled my work. The first one is that *South Park* is a site where dominant meanings are produced, affirmed, and circulated, but at the same time attacked, criticized, and negotiated. As a TV show, *South Park* is both commercial and subversive. While it is part of the dominant culture, it, at the same time, critiques that culture which it is a part of. The second main focus lies on *South Park*'s textual peculiarities. In my view, *South Park*'s incredible intertextuality and bold recontextualization of competing discourses make the show an effective mirror of a divided nation. To me, the show is radically oppositional in so many ways. It holds the mirror of satire up to both competing political camps.

Let me now give you an overview of the paper's structure. After the introduction, Chapter II jumps right into the question of what makes up the ideology of conservatism. The short answer: opposition to change. Myth, as a cultural narrative which aims at defending the status quo, will be topicalized. Chapter III looks at safety as a conservative concern. Concepts that intrigue me most are that of New Provincialism (Thompson 2007) and the clustering of politically like-minded (Galston & Nivola 2006, Epstein 2007, Abramowitz 2010). These are factors which contribute to the increasing polarization of American society. In Chapter IV, I respond to the image problems of both extreme political camps, as reflected in *South Park*. On the one hand, this chapter examines the anti-liberal and anti-political-correctness rhetoric of *South Park*. I tackle the evolution of political correctness in *South Park* and the trend to use liberal as a pejorative term (Hanley 2007, Neiheisel 2016). On the other hand, conservatives⁵ are not spared from being critiqued in the show. This juxtaposition calls attention to the political ambivalence of *South Park* and its reflection of a polarized nation. Next, Chapter V focusses on the growing divisions among the American population. The issues of the disappearing political center, affective polarization, and the realignment of ideological and partisan identification are investigated. Chapter VI turns to the

⁵ When I refer to 'conservatives' I do not use the term as an essentialist categorisation. I rather see this attribution in critical distance, as a socialized narrative of justification.

dividing subject of issue polarization. The focus is on *South Park*'s rendering of conservative standpoints on the relationship between religion and the state, gay marriage, American pro- versus anti-war stances, immigration policies, and modern economic developments. Chapter VII takes up the issues raised in Chapter II and elaborates on the conservative sentiment of displacement and exclusion. Finally, Chapter VIII brings it all together. This chapter points up the dilemma of US conservatism, by challenging a statement that has disillusioned a number of American conservatives in the first half of the current presidency: "Let's make this country great again". Was the past really that 'great'? What is it that needs to be conserved? After all, it is *South Park*'s relentless recontextualization and inherent intertextuality which make it an accurate reflection of a divided America.

CHAPTER II: “Where has my country gone?”

Before proceeding to examine the various ways in which *South Park* interacts with conservative viewpoints, it is imperative to delineate the understanding of conservatism as employed in this paper. Previous studies mostly define conservatism as an ideology. Nisbet (1986: 21) respectively suggests that all ideologies have their dogmatics, more or less coherent and persistent bodies of belief and value. Furthermore, Nisbet points out that those dogmatics have determinative influence on their holders' lives. Shannon (1962: 14) clarifies that conservatives wish to preserve present or past values rather than create or accept new ones. In addition, Honderich (1990: 1) emphasizes that conservatism announces already by its name that it *conserves*. According to Honderich, conservatism positions itself in many cases openly against change. Along these lines, the term ‘conservatism’ has come to universally refer to any opposition to reform, not only in historical or political discourses, but in all social realms.

2.1. “You’re stuck in another time, afraid of change, no matter how necessary that change may be!”

Conservatism as opposition to change permanently features in *South Park*. The majority of *South Park*'s characters generally favors social continuity through the first eighteen seasons of the show. However, upheavals in the American political and social landscape encroach on the show's satirical tactics. For *South Park*'s residents it seems increasingly impossible to relentlessly hold on to the old ways in an everchanging nation.

Randy Marsh is *South Park*'s political pushover. Novelties are, in general, embraced unhesitatingly by Randy. In the first episode of season twenty-one he comes to Darryl's⁶ home, offering help.

Randy: “Darryl? [*keeps knocking*] Darryl, come on! Everyone's trying to work things out but you!”

Darryl: [*opens the door with beer in hand*] “You all work 'em out. Leave me alone.”

Randy: “You're stuck in another time, afraid of change no matter how necessary that change may be!”

Darryl: “You don't know everything!”

Randy: “Why are you so closed-minded? Don't you see that these walls have to be broken down before any progress can be made?”

Darryl: “It's 'cause I can't do it, alright?! I can't take out the wall between my livin' room and my kitchen! It's a load-bearin' wall! “

Randy: “Oh, God, Darryl, I-“ (S21E1).

The context of this scene is Randy and his wife Sharon's zeitgeisty TV show “White People Renovating Houses”. This only becomes obvious at the end of the conversation where the footing

⁶ Darryl is introduced as “pissed-off, white-trash, redneck conservative” in Season 8, Episode 7.

of the scene neatly shifts. At first, the viewer feels as if Randy was openly attacking Darryl's ideological orientation. Accusing him of being "stuck in another time", Randy alludes to Darryl's conservative attitude. Randy also proposes that to make progress, Darryl would need to break down walls, a metaphor for leaving old ways behind and gaining new perspectives. Also, the breaking down of walls has the connotation of destructing the barriers between people with different opinions, to enable communication and understanding. However, Randy himself does not understand the full dimensions of Darryl's concerns.

In interpretative terms, conservatism is personified in the load-bearing wall. For many people, conservative ideology is what holds their world together. In general, conservatism is thought to have a stabilizing function in times of disruption. Moreover, according to Cook (1974: 46), conservatism has a "special love" for order, stability, tradition, hierarchy, and continuity. In *South Park*, the aspiration for these values is depicted in the characters' fear of processes, political or social, that provoke change and the characters' active desire for the conservation of normativity. Cook (1974: 45-46) moreover argues that the "heart of conservatism is opposition to change, reverence for the past [...], and glorification of the status quo". This backward-looking habit is prominent in many *South Park* episodes, for instance in season twenty, when Mr. Garrison, the President, accuses PC Principal for having him called a "relic left over from another time" (S20E8). Ultimately, being stuck in another time obstructs a hopeful look ahead.

2.2. "This whole country's goin' to shit!"

For conservatives, change is, principally, bad. Conservatism is on solid ground when claiming that change as such is not necessarily good or desirable. However, one needs to keep in mind that liberalism also doesn't advocate change for the sake of change. Therefore, conservatives should, according to Cook (1947: 47), also recall that stability, continuity, and traditionalism are not self-justifying and necessarily desirable. Huntington (1957: 460) thinks that conservatives do not want to recreate a future ideal which they assume to have existed in the past. For a typical conservative "change is change". Accordingly, Huntington (1957: 460) states that there is no valid distinction between "change backward" and "change forward." Change is change, and it is always away from the status quo. This assumption is usually connected with pessimism towards change.

In *South Park* there are various instances in which this pessimism concerning change surfaces. In season twenty-one, Darryl prosaically observes: "This whole country's goin' to shit!" (S21E1). His word choice is quite intense and suggests that he does not see any positive side to the changes. Mr. Garrison employs a similar rhetoric in his classroom when he asks: "I know you're all as pissed off as I am, so why don't we begin today's lesson on why the once-great empire of Rome, fell to shit! Huh?! Who can tell my why Rome fell to shit?!" (S19E2). Mr. Garrison

compares America to Ancient Rome. Even though, there is no answer to his question, the audience can presume that it was change which made Rome “fall to shit”. Tweek has an even more definitive pessimistic outlook on the country’s future: “We’re all gonna die!” (S21E2). Tweek repeatedly screams this phrase during the second episode of the latest⁷ season.

This kind of pessimistic outlook is, however, not the famous “American Way”, according to Cook (1947: 55). He claims that, primarily, America has always been optimistic about its future. Cook is convinced that the American people is future-oriented and believes in the chances of progress (Cook 1947: 55). Seventy-one years ago, Cook was sure that “[p]essimism about the future is not the American way and outlook. Optimism is” (Cook 1947: 55). The 2016 election has disproven his idealistic assertion at the latest.

2.3. “And where’s my country gone?”

Let me now return to Mr. Garrison’s initial question which gave fresh impetus to the conservative trend in the *South Park* universe: “Where has my country gone?” (S19E2). To answer his question, one would first need to clarify what characterized this country he reports missing. Referring to the country claiming personal possession, “my”, adds emotional value to the ‘country’, be it a place, a nation, a smaller community. The interrogative particle “where” suggests that movement has been involved, to dislocate the country from its original location. New conservatism claims that the cultural and political situation of the present needs to be fixed. “Conservatism has always been connected with reaction, with tradition, with stability” (Thompson 2007: 3). According to Thompson (2007: 3), the new conservatism is different from traditional conservatism in this regard. It considers itself as an ideology that points to the cultural and political crises of the present. The new conservatism “claims” that “everything” has broken down and that it, alone, has the power to fix it, “to make the crooked straight” (Thompson 2007: 3).

One of the verses of Mr. Garrison’s “Where has my country gone?” song has the following wording: “It took 43 Presidents to make us stand tall. And just one black guy to unravel it all” (S19E2). The contrasting juxtaposition of the “Presidents” and the “black guy” is noteworthy. It seems like as if Mr. Garrison does not acknowledge the legitimacy of the “black guy” in the Oval Office. The reduction of former President Obama to a physical characteristic objectifies him. An obvious reading of Mr. Garrison’s rhetoric connects to racist discourse. Blaming an outgroup for failings of the most different types has kind of a tradition in the US. With regard to social changes, Obama’s first presidency in 2008 reawoke conservative feelings within the American nation. According to Abate (2010: 181), there were many white people in the country who felt that they

⁷ Season 22 starts September 2018.

were losing everything they knew, that "the country their forefathers built has somewhat been stolen from them".

It is exactly this country of the forefathers which is often referred to as a unifying factor. The image of the "mystical fatherland" is what held the American people together for generations. Their imagined community, as being mirrored in *South Park*, has common heritage, that's what holds them together. After all, myth works by turning culture into nature, accordingly, conservatives believe that the fatherland is natural. Myth feeds cultural narratives which defend the status quo and promote values of dominant groups. Finally, myth is an invisible but dominant code.

On the one hand, Gournelos is certainly correct when he says that contemporary US conservatives seek to retain a mythical America, often phrased in terms reminiscent of the American Dream, the Frontier, and patriotism (Gournelos 2009). On the other hand, while holding on to older traditions, contemporary conservatism is, according to Dillard, indeed a social product of recent American history (Dillard 2001: 15). The contemporary conservatives' backward-looking thinking longs for stability. Eventually, this stability is connected with the conservative sentiment of safety.

CHAPTER III: “Member feeling safe”

South Park’s Member Berries are the physical manifestation of the new conservative ideology which contemporarily infuses the US’s electorate. First appearing in season twenty, the Member Berries continuously voice major conservative concerns that haunt *South Park*’s residents. Being safe from threats within and beyond the borders is one of those main concerns.

3.1. “Well, we’ve... put a wall around the city to keep outsiders out”

Safety has been an issue in many *South Park* episodes so far. In season six, after recurring cases of child abduction, *South Park*’s townspeople have an ingenious idea to keep their children safe. They decide on totally enclosing their town by having the owner of the Chinese restaurant build a wall around *South Park*. The episode “Child Abduction is Not Funny” was aired in July 2002. In the meantime, reality has caught up on satire. The total isolation from “outsiders” “is a trend which *South Park* reflects”.

Richard, Tweek’s father, sums up the idea of the townspeople: “Well, we’ve... put a wall around the city to keep outsiders out” (S6E11). The most striking aspect of this statement is the construction of the “outsiders”. By referring to an unspecified group of people as outsiders, *South Park*’s people isolate themselves from everyone who does not share their identity. This textual representation achieves a clear-cut social opposition. *South Park*, as an imagined community, fears the loss of their secluded safety. Their isolation from more cosmopolitan, urban areas can be referred to as new provincialism. *South Park*’s new provincialism is an anachronistic movement to advancing globalization. According to Thompson (2007: 20), American culture has always been subjected to tension between its cosmopolitan, urban spheres and its more traditional, provincial ones. Traditionally, the urban centers claimed most of the political influence and power. Yet, new conservatism has shown that the nonurban, Thompson (2007: 20) calls it “anti-urban”, has succeeded to rise. Indeed, the nonurban has come to increasingly influence and shape aspects of American politics and culture.

Let me refer to another indicator of *South Park*’s inward-looking inclination. “Friendly faces everywhere, humble folks without temptation!” This is the verse which Stan and Kyle sing in *South Park*’s theme song, introducing almost every episode since 1997. The use of the historically loaded word “folks” is intriguing. Folks is, on the one hand, an archaic word for a people or tribe. On the other hand, it is used to refer to people as the carriers of culture, usually associated with the transmission of moral values, customs, and forms of behavior in a particular society. Folks, in the American English lexicon, also means parents or can be used to refer to other family members or relatives. In this sense, *South Park*’s theme song creates a notion of a closely

related circle within the town, among the townsfolks, so to speak. South Park's citizens live in a provincialized environment, isolated from the reach of urban centers. In this isolated environment, it is comparatively easy to circulate partial political and ideological views. As a result, it is not surprising that a pronounced conservative mindset took roots in the secluded montane settlement.

3.2. "There'll be so many guns that nothing bad can happen."

This conservative mindset takes shape in naturalized ways of conduct that bypass critical scrutiny by South Park's citizens. With regard to safety I would like to highlight one of these naturalized and normalized issues. For the people in South Park, owning a gun has become commonplace and remains unquestioned, even by the town's more politically sensitive inhabitants (e.g. Randy, Kyle). South Park's citizens simply feel safer when armed. In season nineteen, episode ten, the gun ownership issue is foregrounded.

Cartman: "So what do we do now?"

Kyle: "There's only one thing we can do." [*turns around*] "We have to get guns."

Butters: "Guns?"

Kyle: "It's the only way for us to be safe." (S19E10).

The boys discuss a way how they could be safe. Their conversation is shaped by questions and answers. Kyle's answers are straightforward and do not indicate slightest hesitation. The repeated use of 'only' underlines Kyle's conviction that there really is 'only' one possibility. However, even though Kyle's argumentation appears to be convincing it is logically flawed. Considered within its wider social context, this scene mirrors the normalized belief that guns grant safety. This fallacious assumption seems somewhat ridiculous but has still found its way into contemporary political debates. Repeated negotiation of the gun issue has eventually led to its legitimation. After the boys have bought the guns, entirely smoothly by the way, Butter sighs: "I already feel a lot safer" (S19E10).

The purchase of guns is normalized and routinized. Jimbo, the owner of the South Park's Gun Shop seizes the moment: "Alright, Mrs. Farnicle, enjoy, and remember: if the safety's on, you're good as gone." (S19E10). Jimbo reminds his costumers to keep the safety catches of their guns released at all times, otherwise they are "good as gone", meaning basically dead already. Jimbo's word choice mirrors the normalization of the gun ownership discourse. He talks to his costumer in a casual manner, adding a catchy slogan. Also, the wish 'enjoy' might appear somewhat out of place in connection with the purchase of a weapon. Still, its nonchalant usage hints at the normalization of gun ownership again.

Another scene which takes the paradox of guns and safety even further is connected with the South Park gun show. It is a huge event where every townsperson is invited.

Kyle: "I'm sure I'd have no problem giving a speech if you could be by my side."

Leslie: "Well... I can't go with you, you know. It's too dangerous."

Kyle: "Not if we go somewhere that's completely safe from any violence."

Leslie: "Where?"

Kyle: "The gun show."

Leslie: "Gun show?"

Kyle: "There'll be so many guns that nothing bad can happen" (S19E10).

The intensifying marker 'completely' strengthens Kyle's argument for the safety of the gun show. Leslie's query has a doubtful character since she repeats Kyle's words as if she has run out of words.

At the gun show in South Park there is suddenly a warning that armed gunmen enter the show.

Randy: "Nobody move!" [*enters the arena with Garrison, Victoria, Caitlyn, Sharon and Stan*]

Mr. Garrison: "Everyone just stay where you are!"

Announcer: "And it looks like the gun show is under attack, David." [*everyone in attendance gets their guns and arms them.*]

David: "Yes, six armed gunmen have entered the arena, one of which is carrying an absolutely gorgeous little Pekingese Glock 17" (S19E10).

Apart from the inherently sarcastic essence of the scene there is more to notice. First of all, it is significant how self-evidently Mr. Garrison and his followers feel superior. Ignoring the fact that every other person is armed too, they storm the gun show acting as the greater danger. The announcers join the game. On the one hand, they start a panic by overdramatizing the situation of armed people on a gun show. On the other hand, David leaves the news coverage register by referring to one gun as if it were a fashionable accessory. He normalizes the incident by incorporating it into their previous nexus of practice, the presentation of guns. This distanced look naturalizes the bearing of arms. The gun ownership discourse originates from the dominant group, which is conservatives in South Park. That is why it has become accepted, naturalized and even universal, in the town of South Park. South Park consists of an almost homogeneously conservative population which builds the foundation for naturalized beliefs and practices.

3.3. "Nobody in town except for our good friends"

"Isn't it awesome havin' a great wall around our city? Nobody in town except for our good friends" (S6E11). Mr. Donovan, Clyde's dad loves their idea. His observation enjoys popularity among the townsfolk: "Yeahah! Alright! Yeah. Right on! Right on!" (S6E11). The unexceptional approval of this idea mirrors the townspeople's like-mindedness. As the townspeople appear to be ideologically practically identical, most of their concerns affect all strata of South Park's society

alike. The Community Center is South Park's hub of exchange and political debates. What can be observed in a series of South Park's public debates is that the Community Center is usually a place of consensus. Deviating opinions, if occurring at all, are generally rather expressed in private, at dinner tables or in pubs, than in the Community Center. The name of the center already reveals a central aspect of South Park's day-to-day lives. Community, the town's community, plays a decisive role from the very beginning of the show. I would like to disclose three quotes that explicitly refer to community in the latest three seasons.

Harrison: "And that's why we have to come together as a community, and resist any temptation to use TrollTrace, [looks at Maggie] Maggie" (S20E9). Harrison leads the community meeting dedicated to internet safety. He emphasizes 'community' as an entity. The comic take in that scene, when Harrison looks at his wife Maggie, signals the personalized interest masked behind the communal good. By separately and prominently addressing her, Harrison reveals the need that despite the sense of consistent community, some issues have different priorities for different individuals. To "come together as a community" points to a habitual nexus of praxis and highlight the significance of the community. The Community Center is the physical manifestation of public sphere and mirrors South Park's homogeneity. Abramowitz (2010: 10) and Galston and Nivola (2006: 5) observe the phenomenon that Americans are nowadays increasingly surrounded by those who share their political outlook. They claim that people often consciously choose to live in neighborhoods dominated by people with whom they agree. The symbolism of such a homogeneous community is nationalistic and conservative, and it characterizes *South Park's* world. Similarly, as Thompson (2007: 19) observes, the conservative mindset is rooted in homogenized enclaves of the nonurban towns and rural areas of the US, just as South Park is one.

The next example for community as an exclusive entity is by Randy: "I've spoken to everyone in the community, and they've agreed to go along with my plan" (S21E1). The claim of having spoken to 'everyone' appears exaggerated. Even though South Park is, indeed, a small town, not every single individual can be reached in such a short time. Yet, the result, that they have all agreed, suggests that the mindsets of the citizens all conform. Galston and Nivola (2006: 12) emphasize that people tend to migrate geographically toward voters of the same mind. Therefore, the territorial contours of the American partisan polarization are increasingly distinct. As a result, cross-party discussions have decreased in those communities, where likeminded people cluster geographically (Epstein 2007: 1). Abramowitz also has an interesting observation concerning the clustering of politically like-minded. He thinks that young, unmarried individuals, who tend to have liberal political attitudes prefer to live in the cities and inner suburbs. On the other hand, married couples with children, who, according to Abramowitz, have a more conservative outlook on life, tend to cluster in the outer suburbs and rural areas (cf. Abramowitz 2010: 10). Weinberg

(1993: 193) confirms Abramowitz' approach, adding that conservatives often live in the periphery while the center makes the crucial decisions which affect everyone's lives. With regard to this demographic tendency, Galston and Nivola (2006: 12) notice another crucial development associated to political polarization. They note that a person's partisan preference appears to be more likely to intensify and persist if this person is spatially surrounded by like-minded people. As partisanship strengthens, so does the aversion for outgroups. Butters prosaically states: "You are either with us or against us! It's really that simple!" (S20E4). What is noteworthy in Butter's statement is the assimilation of 'us', the way in which he represents different social actors as an inclusive group. The referential strategy 'us' also fosters social cohesion and cements the relationships of people against possibly threatening diversity.

Richard also emphasizes the notion of community: "We invited you to come speak to our community about our problems!" (21E4). 'Our community' is a central concern for Richard. It sounds as if he takes possession of the community and accordingly linguistically amplifies its worth. By reference to 'our problems' shared knowledge is implied. Shared knowledge comprises mutual beliefs and ideologies and enables people to live in harmony. Indeed, the secluded life of South Park lets people live in a privatized atmosphere of "detachment". If desired, one can live in separateness from others, in particular separated from all "difference" (Thompson 2007: 21). In its early seasons, generally up to season nineteen, South Park really is such a safe space from external threats. Only friends, people who think alike, are allowed to settle there. However, parallel to developments in reality, the threats to safety have changed and modernized in *South Park* too. Safety concerns no longer only have to take one's physical space into account. Cyberspace has also been infiltrated. As Dr. Wayne Schroeder explains to South Park's parents in season twenty: "Nobody is safe" (S20E2).

3.4. "People don't judge me, and haters don't hate in my safe spaaaaace"

The internet and its opportunities for use have gradually become a safety concern in American society. Cyberspace, or the so called 'blogosphere', is a new mode for communication and participation as well as a new public space. At the same time, the internet provides ample opportunities for echo chambers, which help circulate one-sided views and issue positions. "SAFE SPACE - DO NOT CROSS" reads the yellow tape which fences the PC brothers' territory in season nineteen. Randy explains their practice:

Randy: "This is a safe space. We're not allowed past this. When you breach a college safe space, you're crossing the most sacred human boundary there is."

Caitlyn: "J'hoh, give me a break."

Randy: "Nonononono, look, this is very real, and very important in PC culture. Every human has a right to a safe space and it cannot be entered."

Garrison: [*determined*] "I can. Watch." [*lifts up the PC tape and walks under and on to the house*]

Randy: "Wow, how did you-?" [*Principal Victoria and Caitlyn Jenner do the same*] "Whoa." (S19E9).

Safety has become a luxury that one has to defend. Modern times have opened up innumerable routes that allow threats to enter personal spaces. Randy refers to the safe space as "the most sacred human boundary there is" (S19E9). He thereby magnifies the significance of the safe space and highlights the importance to observe it. Moreover, the hyperbolic expression "this is very real" stresses Randy's conviction but at the same time also reveals a relativity of reality. On the linguistic level, the intensity marker 'very' strengthens Randy's argument. The expression 'cannot be entered' carries evaluative load via the modal verb. It also creates the sense of emotional involvement and passion for the issue. The consequence of this representation is that it pictures safety as a convenience that can be claimed, rather than an inherent right for everyone. To me, this narrative carries a problematic hint.

In season nineteen, Cartman is the one who sets the trend for his so-called "safe space". As Cartman walks through the hallways of the school, this song starts to play:

Cartman: "Everyone likes me and thinks I'm great in my safe spaaaaace."

Jason Seagal: "My safe spaaaaace. "

Cartman: "People don't judge me, and haters don't hate in my safe spaaaaace."

PC Principal: "Your safe spaaaaace."

Cartman and Seagal: "Bully-proof windows, troll-safe doors, nothing but kindness and healing."

Randy: "You might call me a pussy, but I won't hear you in my safe spaaaaace."

Seagal: "My safe spaaaaace."

Cartman: "Bully-proof windows."

Demi Lovato: "If you do not like me, you are not allowed in my safe spaaaaace."

Plus-sized models: "My safe spaaaaace"

PC Principal: "Look and you will see there's a very select crowd in your safe spaaaaace."

All: "My safe spaaaaace."

Cartman: "People that support me."

All: "Mixed in with"

Cartman: "More people that support me."

All: "And say nice things. Rainbows all around me, there is no shame in my safe spaaaaace" (S19E5).

The above is an enormously inspiring song. Especially for anybody who enjoys receiving mere support and no negative or oppositional comments. With "everyone likes me", "people don't judge me", "haters don't hate me" etc. Cartman refers to all the positive characteristics of echo chambers

within the blogosphere. He does not allow any diverging opinions into his safe space, and many celebrities follow his example. The non-diegetic sound in this scene (i.e. the music) adds to the humor and the subversion of it. The enjambment from “people that support me” to “more people that support me”, intensifies the argument of Cartman’s lyrics. There is no variation in the mindset of the people he interacts with. The safe space is an imagined homogeneous community. At the same time, alternatives to the status quo are ignored and excluded. Iyengar et.al. (2012: 427) observe that technology has “facilitated people’s ability to seek out information sources they find agreeable and tune out others that prove dissonant”.

Wodak and Meyer (2016: 9) agree on this point and add: “When most people in a society think alike about certain matters, [...] we arrive at the Gramscian concept of ‘hegemony’”. According to this rationale, South Park’s citizens live in a conservative hegemony. Under these circumstances, the notion of safety as employed in this episode regards the protection from and exclusion of clashing mindsets.⁸

I would like to add that two substantial studies of well-known political blogs conclude that the bloggers show homophily (see Lawrence et.al. 2010). Homophily is the tendency to associate with others who are and think similar to oneself (Lawrence et.al. 2010: 142).⁹ There is an English saying: Birds of a feather flock together. This tendency is also reflected in *South Park* where the politically like-minded always stick together, on every issue. The small town South Park is the manifestation of such a “safe space” where diverging views are not tolerated. Occasionally, oppositional i.e. liberal opinions materialize in South Park, still they are in general rejected and ridiculed.

⁸ Lawrence et.al. (2010: 142) say that “blogs reinforce readers’ and authors’ ideological perspectives instead of challenging them, and thereby lead to increased political polarization over time”.

⁹ On homophily in social networks, see McPherson, Miller; Smith-Lovin, Lynn; Cook, James M. 2001. “Birds of a Feather: Homophily in Social Networks”. *Annual Review of Sociology* 27, 415-444.

CHAPTER IV: “I googled South Park before I came here, and I cannot believe the shit you're getting away with!”

The rejection and ridicule of liberal ideas in South Park leads to the town's increasing image problem in season nineteen. As Mayor McDaniels observes: “I've called you all here because South Park has an image problem. Thanks to Mr. Garrison we are now being referred to as the shit-heads of America” (S19E3). *South Park*, the show, reinforces the ideological incline of South Park's citizens. Yet, conservatism is similarly not represented as the ultimate desirable value and gets its come-uppance in the show too. *South Park*'s satirical approach to both ends of the political spectrum contribute to its political ambiguity which makes the show an effective mirror of the polarized American society.

4.1. “Oh hey, I'm from South Park! We don't take kindly to respecting human beings!”

The nomination of Mr. Garrison as a presidential candidate has plunged South Park into a crisis. The statement in the chapter's title originates from Jimmy Fallon (S19E3), host of NBC's *Tonight Show* which principally addresses American pop culture, current politics, and social awkwardness. As *South Park*'s chief characters watch the show, they gradually become aware of their decades-long intolerant, bigoted behavior. Season nineteen sparks an evolution of political correctness in South Park. Amongst the townspeople, the position of political correctness undergoes four major stages. It evolves from rejection, via acceptance/adoption, over ridicule, to tolerance.

4.1.1. “Some college kid's gonna come in and tell us our ways are old?”

When political correctness, personified as PC Principal, enters *South Park*'s stage in season nineteen, it faces outspoken rejection. Due to the age-long cultivation of conservative and anti-liberal mindsets in South Park, the progressive PC Principal was perceived as an obnoxious outsider.

Mr. Mackey: “And a new person has been appointed to try and make South Park Elementary a more... progressive place that... fits in with today's times. Heh ukay? So please welcome... PC Principal.”

PC Principal: “Alright, listen up. My name is PC Principal. I don't know about you, but frankly I'm sick and tired of how minority groups are marginalized in today's society. I'm here because this place is lost in a time warp!” (S19E1).

When Mr. Mackey introduces the new principal to the townspeople his tone of voice, posture and language make him appear considerably insecure. The hedging “try to make” reflects the speaker's cautious approach. Moreover, he seems to seek feedback, or even confirmation, from his listeners by adding the tag question “ukay?”. The rhetoric in Mr. Mackey's utterance reflects the skeptical,

sometimes hostile, bias towards political correctness. This attitude is not exclusively conservative. However, it seems most prevailing on the right end of the ideological spectrum.

Despite Mr. Mackey's careful approach, the introduction of PC Principal meets with opposition. Randy is skeptical: “I mean, who the hell does this guy think he is? Some college kid's gonna come in and tell us our ways are old?” (S19E1). By reducing the new head of school to “some college kid”, Randy delegitimizes PC Principal's authority. South Park's secluded community has been a fertile ground for conservative and regressive thoughts. The sudden menace to make it a more “progressive place” threatens to invert the world as South Park's residents know it. In the American discourse, being politically correct is a loaded phrase, connected to unsubstantiated prejudice. Cantor (2007: 100) notes that political correctness is a modern-day taboo enforced by social pressure and sometimes even legal sanctions. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that *South Park*'s conservatives oppose the far-reaching innovations political correctness would bring.

In the end of the above cited introduction, PC Principal sums up his position and the core meaning of political correctness in a clear fashion. Political correctness means that it has become unacceptable to make derogatory comments on anybody with reference to their race, gender, religion, or handicap.

4.1.2. “We've been getting away with horrible things”

Randy is the first South Park native deserting to political correctness. He puts his initial skepticism aside and adopts the PC attitude. Eventually, Randy becomes an aspirant for political correctness at the PC fraternity house, in order to be introduced to the PC community. The second stage of political correctness in South Park, acceptance and adoption, is thereby heralded.

PC Principal: “All right pledgies, we're excited. You wanna try and be PC. We hope you've got what it takes to join the most socially active group in America.”

PC Bros: “Weoooh!”

PC Principal: “You know, there's still some people out there that say, “What does being PC really mean?” Well, I'll tell you what it means. It means you love nothin' more than beer, workin' out, and that feelin' you get when you rhetorically defend a marginalized community from systems of oppression” (S19E1).

Again, PC Principal explains what being PC means. This time, he adds more pleasant aspects of being PC. His description initially does not hint at the core characteristics of the socially active group. Only the subordinate clause brings in the intrinsic elements of the PC movement, as if they were an afterthought, so self-evident that they would not have to be mentioned. PC Principal phrases this afterthought in an idiosyncratic manner. By subsuming the defense of marginalized groups under “that feelin' you get”, PC Principal draws attention to the personalized aspect of

being PC, the personal enlightenment and glorification. The self-opinionated and often patronizing tendencies of politically correct people contribute to the movement's unpopularity. Consequently, the public image of political correctness is biased in many ways.

After Randy has joined the PC bros, he immediately falls into the behavioral pattern of his PC fellows. Sharon shouts at Randy because he comes home late after the PC meeting. Randy defends himself:

Randy: "I've joined a social awareness group. It's a coalition that discourages the use of ... words that have negative or offensive connotations... to grant respect to people who are victims of unfair stereotypes."

Sharon: "You got in at six and now you're missing work."

Randy: "We've been getting away with horrible things, Sharon. Having- laughs at less privileged people and thinking it was harmless. Our group is... trying to be a civilizing influence... where we discuss and have meetings to better define and reinforce tolerance and acceptance [*voice trails off*] of all groups of people" (S19E1).

Randy seemingly has learnt a lot about political correctness in just one night. However, his overlexicalization might hint at ideological struggle. The extensive use of near synonyms, for instance "tolerance" and "acceptance", alludes to Randy's internal struggle between opposing practices. When he says, "We've been getting away with horrible things" Randy still includes himself inside the group of socially less aware citizens. Yet, at the same time, he patronizes and condemns the old-established ways of conduct. While Randy whole-heartedly adopts the politically correct demeanor, other townspeople struggle with merely the acceptance of the new conventions. Political correctness threatens to subvert everything that South Park's inhabitants know, similarly to America's population. This threat comes at a time where the status quo is already under fire. As a result, the nationwide propagation of political correctness seems to be the final straw. However, genuine conservatives simply cannot adjust to the demands of political correctness, as current politicians effectively showcase each and every day. The divergencies between acceptance and adoption of political correctness are equally pronounced in *South Park's* fictional community as they are in the US American political realm.

With the advancement of political correctness as the only legitimate way of behaving, the day-to-day lives of South Park's citizens have dramatically changed. When the men, including the increasingly enraged Mr. Garrison, informally chat at Crunchy's Micro Brew, Mr. Adler observes the problem in today's world.

Mr. Adler: "Well what are you gonna do? In today's world it's like you can't even say anything negative about illegal immigrants-"

Randy: [*Approaching and gesturing like a siren*] "Weoo weoo weoo weoo weoo! Did somebody over here say "illegal immigrants"? Because the correct term is "undocumented immigrants," alright bro?" [*leaves*] (S19E2).

Before Mr. Adler can even finish his sentence, he would probably have said something like "without being rebuked by PC people", he is interrupted by Randy. This scene ironically acts out the despised tendency of politically correct citizens to correct every slightly offensive word. In addition, Randy acts like a siren, indicating that he believes he is coming to the other men's rescue. The amicable tag question at the end of his intervention brings the conversation back to the interpersonal level. However, the remark carries a sarcastic note. Keeping in mind that Randy clearly perceives himself to be the more civilized conversational partner in this situation, his "alright bro?" becomes a patronizing, condescending comment.

Mr. Mackey also finds himself in a delicate situation when he answers PC Principal's question about ethnic minorities in South Park.

Mr. Mackey: "Well, we have Token; he's black."

PC Principal: [*aims his left index finger at Mr. Mackey*] "And that's two days' detention for you, Mackey! Congratulations!" (S19E1).

PC Principal has the gift to twist the South Park citizens' every word. He ignores Mr. Mackey's defensive intention and punishes him without further clarification. With the acceptance of political correctness, penalization has become the strategy for enforcing tolerance in society. While *South Park*'s microcosm limits the punishment to detention, the American government has tightened disciplinary sanctions on violating political correctness and hate crimes.¹⁰ Amongst the American population, the feeling arises that nobody can speak their mind anymore without being interrupted and corrected by politically correct people. As a result, many Americans view political correctness as a form of censorship which prevents them from expressing their viewpoints. Especially conservatives accuse political correctness of being a mechanism to ban free speech, an invasive control mechanism of big government.

Apart from the patronizing attitude of political correctness, there is another issue with the total acceptance of political correctness. Making an entire town or even nation PC does not automatically solve all its problems. Nathan reflects on this potential flaw of political correctness: "What is PC but a verbal form of gentrification? Spruce everything up, get rid of all the ugliness in order to create a false sense of paradise" (S19E9). Nathan's use of the imperative voice has a persuasive undertone. His commanding tone alludes to the habit of PC to enforce its standards to everybody. Nathan's statement is surprisingly contemplative and questions the conventionalized ways of behavior political correctness has instituted in South Park. Randy seems to be deceived by this false sense of paradise. He tells his wife Sharon: "Diverse people are moving here, and everyone is being aware of how they talk. This is paradise, Sharon!"

¹⁰ See S4E2, "Cartman's Stupid Hate Crime".

Sharon: [*gets in his face*] "Is it? All I know is that you've changed. Ever since you joined this PC thing you just bully people. And wait for people to say anything improper so you can jump down their throats for whatever words he or she used."

Randy: "He or she is an agenderphobic microaggression, Sharon. You are a bigot" (S19E8).

Even though Sharon endeavors to produce a politically correct utterance, Randy still finds something micro-aggressive in it. Sharon avoids the generic pronoun "he" in order to bypass sexist language. However, Randy enters another aspect into the equation: agender. Apparently, Randy has indulged into the politically correct discourse to such an extent that he is no longer satisfied with his fellow South Park citizens' amateur attempts at being PC. This leads into the next chapter "don't you think you're overdoing it?".

4.1.3. "We all get your point, but don't you think you're overdoing it?"

The third stage of political correctness' evolution in South Park is ridicule. Firstly, the over-motivation of PC people is often interpreted as exaggerated. Next, the often-criticized hypocrisy of political correctness will be examined. Lastly, the development of anti-liberal rhetoric, also as exemplified in *South Park*, is on trial. I am going to take up these issues in the above order. Typically, the examples of political correctness in *South Park* are portrayed in such an extreme way, that the satire comes naturally. To me it seems that this feature is also true for reality most of the time. Exaggerated and meticulous political correctness has a comic potential to it, in my view.

4.1.3.1. "Hey, how are you, you fuckin' racist?"

South Park's "Holiday Special" (S21E3) is about the abolition of Columbus Day due to the violent history of Christopher Columbus' conquest. The episode is a prime example of how liberalism, in particular political correctness, sometimes goes overboard with its do-gooder mission. Randy is instantly on fire concerning this initiative and sets out to harass the inhabitants of Columbus, Ohio.

Stan: "Dad, listen: you need to ease off a little here."

Randy: "Stan, it's not right that people celebrate a man who wiped out millions of people for his own glory! [*puts his phone up to his right ear*] Let's go! [*places his first call*] Hello? Is this uh [*checks his laptop screen*] Howard Peterson? You live in Columbus, Ohio, is that correct? Yeah? You racist piece of shit. You heard me. You're an intolerant pig. Oh, you're not? You just choose to live in a city named for ethnic cleansing. No, fuck you! Rename your city, asshole! Hello? [*evidently, the recipient hung up*] Okay, next one, come on. Get calling, Stan!"

Stan: "Dad, come on. We all get your point, but don't you think you're overdoing it?"

Randy: "You have to overdo it in today's society Stan. You can't be nuanced and subtle anymore or else critics go "Wow, what was the point of that?" [*places the next calls*] Hi, Francis Melman? Hey, how are you, you fuckin' racist?" (S21E3).

Randy is convinced that "[y]ou have to overdo it in in today's society" to get your point across (S21E3). His telephone terror on an entire city suits his exaggerated concept of making the world

a better place. Still, the language he applies to achieve his goal is somewhat questionable. This confirms Sharon's earlier allegation that Randy uses the "PC thing" as an excuse to bully people (S19E8). The language Randy uses is rude and insensitive. It therefore highlights the bias of political correctness. The aim of political correctness is not the respectful interaction with every individual, but rather the defense of the socially less privileged, often at the expense of other groups of people. Fundamental tolerance for each and every social group is not a feature of political correctness. This justifies criticism on the do-gooder self-image of many extreme liberals. In particular, the right fraction of the political spectrum argues that liberals' biased justness misses the mark and instead condemns the majority of Americans.

Another example for exaggerated political correctness can be found in the episode "Goobacks" aired in 2004. Stan is enraged that the "Goobacks" took his job and adjusts to the rhetoric of others who have lost their positions. His parents are upset that their son uses such "time-bashing slur" (S8E7).¹¹ When Stan later in the episode uses "the g-word" again, Sharon puts Stan in his place:

Sharon: "We're not raising our son to be an ignorant timecist."

Stan: "Timecist?"

Sharon: "You know, a racist, but against people from the - "

Stan: "People from the future. Right, got it" (S8E7).

On the outermost level, this scene represents a typical family dinner. Sharon defends her method of upbringing and condemns Stan's deviant behavior. However, Stan's "Right, got it" has a sarcastic tone and shrugs off his mother's concerns. For Stan, his parents' exorbitant political receptiveness only causes head-shaking. The neologism "timecist" points towards the trend within the political correctness community to expand its overcautious approach from ethnic minorities to literally any outgroup in society. The "timecist" scene is a perfect example of how political correctness expands to social markers which are not included in the original understanding of PC. Political correctness seems to reinterpret every slightly derogative or potentially offensive comment or act and transform it into an anti-PC crime.

This reinterpretation of potential misconduct brings me back to "Holiday Special" (S21E3). Living in a city named Columbia is automatically but arbitrarily associated with being racist. This wide generalization is far-fetched and, not least, hyperbolic. After all, Randy's endeavor in "Holiday Special" (S21E3) is exceptionally hypocritical. Later in the episode, the audience learns that Randy has once been a big Columbus fan as large as life. He even got married in a Columbus costume, just as a footnote. In "Holiday Special", one of the boys uses a masked voice in a phone

¹¹ "Goobacks" is a somatization, a metonymic reference to label a group of people with reference to a place or thing that is closely related with them. This practice is, of course, despised by more socially sensitive people.

call: “Randy Marsh is a hypocrite and a fake. You will be taken down with him when he is exposed!” (S21E3). The hypocrisy of people referring to themselves as politically correct is another aspect that attracts criticism.

4.1.3.2. “That word makes my heart piss its pants”

The hypocrisy of political correctness is most palpable when it comes to the treatment of different minority groups. In this chapter, I want to primarily consider South Park’s PC people’s behavior in dealing with people with disabilities, as this is the recurrent issue in season nineteen. Jimmy¹² becomes the enemy of PC Principal by challenging his self-righteous attitude.

PC Principal: “Look, I don't wanna get angry, okay?”

Jimmy: “Why? Are you uncomfortable around people with disabilities? That's okay. Lots of people are.”

PC Principal: “No, I'm not. I am very not uncomfortable!” (S19E8).

PC Principal’s double negative illustrates his inner struggle and the felt need to clearly set himself apart from being “uncomfortable”. Using a twofold way of negation, and the intensity marker “very”, PC Principal strengthens his argument. However, his overconscientious denial makes it sound implausible. PC Principal is upset that Jimmy accuses him of feeling uncomfortable around him: “Who does this kid think he is?! Challenging me?! I said one micro-aggression to him, okay?! One little micro-aggression! But that doesn't mean I have an unconscious bias towards people with disabilities!” (S19E8). However, even though PC Principal repeatedly denies it, this unconscious bias manifests in a number of *South Park* episodes. Throughout the entire season nineteen, Jimmy continuously appears to be a serious challenge to PC Principal’s overly tolerant views.

PC Principal: “I just saw a copy of the school newspaper in which a student used the word “retarded” to refer to our cafeteria lunch policy! The word “retarded” does not belong in our school!! Who is in charge of the school paper?! ‘Cause I'm about to break their fuckin’ legs!”

Stan: “Aaah, he's in charge of the school paper.” [*points to his right. PC Principal turns left and faces... Jimmy. PC Principal is speechless.*] “You gonna break his legs, PC Principal?” (S19E8).

PC Principal’s handling of Jimmy is *South Park*’s showpiece of PC hypocrisy. Even though PC Principal’s goal is to eliminate all discrimination, his refusal to punish Jimmy is in itself an act of discrimination. He treats Jimmy differently because of his disability. PC Principal’s intentions are, without doubt, very noble, however implementation remains poor. PC Principal’s practice verges on positive discrimination, a practice which, if implemented on a national level, attracts criticism from conservatives with one accord. Positive discrimination, or affirmative action, granting

¹² Jimmy is one of South Park’s handicapped children, he has ataxic cerebral palsy and exotropia.

minorities safe workplaces, would entail undesired government intervention and is therefore a non-negotiable matter for conservatives. Becker (2008: 155) notes that even though *South Park* as a show is tolerant of diversity, it is critical of institutionally compelled acceptance. The prescriptivism imposed by political correctness contradicts traditional American values such as free speech.

Jimmy appears to also reject the notion of positive discrimination. He wants to be treated like everybody else, he does not want to be called "special" all the time. When Leslie asks him "They told me I was special. Are you special too?", Jimmy answers dryly: "I prefer "handicapped"" (S19E8). This dialogue illustrates the pitfall of PC people who frequently do not listen to the voices of the affected and practice PC primarily for their own self-aggrandizement. PC Principal personifies this pretense. For instance, when he intends to ban the word "retarded" from the school newspaper.

PC Principal: "Nathan, could you tell Jimmy how you feel when people use the word "retarded"?"

Nathan: "It hurts my feelings because I feel bad."

Jimmy: "Are you serious right now?"

PC Principal: "You feel bad, right. You feel like that's a no-no word, right?"

Nathan: "That word makes my heart piss its pants." (S19E8).

The extreme hypocrisy of PC Principal is overwhelming. Evidently, PC Principal associates differently with the disabled students than with all the others. The language he uses when speaking with Nathan can be considered degrading and shows PC Principal's underlying doubts about Nathan's mental capabilities, e.g. "no-no word". This proves that even though political correctness might eventually change the language used, it does not automatically change the underlying attitudes.

4.1.3.3. *"I want social justice and now I'm being made fun of."*

The ridicule of political correctness expands into the disdain of liberalism in general. Far-reaching anti-liberal rhetoric not only spreads in *South Park*, but in America as well. *South Park* parodies the exaggeratedly politically correct rhetoric of the American left, but also mirrors the Republicans' traditional effort of turning 'liberal' into a dirty word.

There are numerous occasions in *South Park* where the label "liberal" is used in a pejorative way. One of the statements which confirm the anti-liberal rhetoric in *South Park* is: "It's that liberal school she's going to, filling her head with all kind of garbage" (S21E10). Mr. White is enraged at how his daughter comes to be afraid of the president and he blames the "liberal school" for it.

Neiheisel (2016: 419) observes an antipathy towards the liberal label and blames the Republican Party for this development. From 1980 onward, Republicans began to use the term "liberal" with great frequency during presidential campaigns, while it disappeared from the Democrats' lexicon. Without competition from Democrats, Republican elites were free to shape the accepted meanings of the label "liberal" (Neiheisel 2016: 420). Neiheisel (2016: 418-419) links the observed divide between ideologies to Republican efforts at making "liberal" a "dirty word". He claims that Republicans of the 1980s converted the term "liberal" into a derogative word due to Reagan's incentive (Neiheisel 2016: 420). However, the link between anti-liberal rhetoric and the Democrats' reluctance to adopt the liberal label has not been explicitly investigated so far. Neiheisel still intends to investigate the effect of anti-liberal campaigns on Democrats' ideological self-identification.

The trend of avoiding calling oneself "liberal" has gone so far as to Democratic candidates referring to themselves as "progressives" instead of liberals in elections. This happens in response to the naturalized stereotypes that are associated with the label "liberal". A number of these stereotypes are satirized in *South Park*. The word liberal itself turns up rarely in *South Park*, however liberalism is a perpetual subject of the show. In general, *South Park* ascribes negative traits to liberalism and its adherents.

In *South Park*'s earlier seasons there has often been direct contrast between liberal and conservative viewpoints and representatives. For instance, in the episode "Goobacks" (S8E7) Bill O'Reilly on the one hand hosts a "pissed-off, white-trash, redneck conservative". He then introduces the liberal person on the opposite side of the table: "And on my left is aging, hippie, liberal douche" (S8E7).

Later in the show, the word "liberal" is just randomly used to refer to any kind of non-conservative worldview and lifestyle. For instance, in season nineteen Reality sarcastically apologizes: "Well I'm sorry, the world isn't one big liberal arts college campus!" (S19E5). In *South Park* the label "liberal" encompasses all different kinds of laziness, incompetence, and hypocrisy. According to Hanley (2007: 53), the Republicans have come to use "liberal" as a pejorative term, meaning anything from a "tree-hugging hippie" to a believer in big government to a woolly-headed moral relativist. Hanley's observation is confirmed by *South Park*'s clichéd rendering of liberals.

The depiction of the PC bros in season nineteen carries the stereotypical portrayal of liberals to extremes. *South Park* draws on the unprecedented notion of being liberal as something young, hip, and modern. Insofar, the PC bros are distinct from *South Park*'s earlier liberals, they are not already way beyond their forties, they do not feature the stereotypical "Hippie"-traits, and they are not environmentalists or animal rights activists. Still, their outstanding endeavor for political correctness shifts the PC bros into the center of satire.

PC Bro 16: "I want social justice and now I'm being made fun of."

PC Bro 17: "Yeah bro. They're taking our incredibly tolerant views and distorting them" (S19E8).

Even though the PC bros appear physically strong on the outside, they lay themselves open to attack. Their elaborate PC language disaccords with their otherwise simple-minded demeanor. To me, it seems as if their PC identity clashes with hegemonic notions of masculinity, making them unable to ignore criticism. Finally, the PC bros' self-victimization exposes them to ridicule. The backlash to political correctness is to view it as ridiculous. Accordingly, the PC bros contribute their share to the negative image of political correctness.

4.1.4. "So, I guess PC Principal is here to stay, huh?"

Political correctness has been an issue in *South Park* since its very first season aired as early as December 1997. "Mr. Hankey the Christmas Poo" (S1E9) has become an iconic example of *South Park*'s anti-PC vantage point. When Sheila, Kyle's mother, gets exasperated with the school's offensive Christmas play, South Park's mayor decides: "I'll put together a crack team of my best workers to make sure this'll be the most non-offensive Christmas ever - to any religious or minority group of any kind." (S1E9). Ultimately, the townspeople get rid of everything that could be offensive under Mayor McDaniels' orders: "Okay, people, we've got to turn this place around! Take down anything that is offensive to any specific group!" (S1E9). The whole town works together to eliminate Christianity out of Christmas, just to realize in the end that "This is like the worst Christmas I have ever seen" (Stan, S1E9), and Father Maxi calling the new Christmas play "the most God-awful piece of crap I've ever seen" (S1E9). The rejection of political correctness wins.

Accordingly, it was not until season nineteen that political correctness has finally gained a foothold in *South Park*'s dominant discourse. Stan realizes early in episode one that "things are going to be different around here" (S19E1). Kyle responds: "You know what? I think it's good. Let's face it: this is long overdue" (S19E1). Gradually, South Park's townspeople come to realize the inevitability of social change, and the one on the language level seems the most easily tolerable. Stan's conclusion to the episode "So I guess PC Principal is here to stay, huh?" (S19E1) alludes to the eventual tolerance of PC in South Park, and the realization that this is just how things work these days. Cartman replies: "Yes. But at least we showed him that sometimes joking about un-PC things can actually be important, because it starts a dialogue" (S19E1).

At the end of the day, it is Cartman of all people who works as a mediative voice in this fundamental conflict of oppositional discourses. He detects the need for dialogue which can alleviate communal life. In a politically more and more polarized world it is crucial to mediate

between conservative and liberal positions. *South Park* sets an example of this "mediating" approach. Becker (2008: 145) has no doubt that *South Park* satirizes matters frequently associated with contemporary left or liberal politics. On the other hand, *South Park* also consequently parodies issues associated with the political right, such as gun ownership, and the Religious Right (Becker 2008: 146). Becker (2008: 146) claims that even though the show mocks political correctness, it is still equally critical of racism, homophobia, and sexism. *South Park* does not only tackle antiliberal themes, but it also features anticonservative motives. By the same token, Curtis and Erion (2007: 120) call *South Park*'s approach "tactic criticism of overzealous left-wing *and* right-wing political extremists" [emphasis added].

4.2. "I live in South Park and my IQ is so low, I've got to dig for it"

The quote in the title again comes from Jimmy Fallon (S19E3). The ideological incline of South Park's citizens, peaking in Mr. Garrison's candidacy for the Republicans, plunges South Park into an image crisis. The label "South Park conservatives" becomes relevant in this context. When I generically refer to South Park conservatives as a specific group of people, I am doing this with regard to Brian Anderson's publication called "South Park Conservatives" (2005). In my view, his approach is a prime example of heartily misreading a TV show's intentions. Of course, I am not saying that Anderson does not have a right to his interpretation, as an interpretation per se cannot be either right or wrong. However, Anderson's unsubstantiated assertion that the creators of *South Park* would be two to the core conservatives overstates the case. Anderson is led to believe that the frequent anti-liberal statements by South Park's residents turn them, and their creators, automatically into hardline conservatives. What Anderson ignores in this respect, is the equally ambiguous and sometimes openly critical portrayal of the conservative political camp. There are three emblematic aspects of conservatism that are habitually satirized in South Park: unintelligence, truthiness, and the unacceptability of some conservative ideals into mainstream political discourse.

4.2.1. "Ain't nobody taking us serious-like"

For a long period of time, conservatism was not considered to be a school of thought, as it initially lacked the intellectual basis. Only after Kirk Russel's "The Conservative Mind" appeared in 1953, the new conservative movement gained an intellectual basis and could, consequently, no longer be dismissed as the ideology of provincials and low-brows (Nash 2009: 320-321). Critchlow (2011: 753-754) is certain that conservatism's intellectual conception runs like a thread through the works of many political thinkers such as Thomas Jefferson, John Locke, George Buchanan, and Jacques Almain. After Ronald Reagan has become a figure of national success, some former

Leftists came to realize that "good intentions alone do not guarantee good governmental policy". As a result, many of them converted to neoconservatism. Those neoconservative intellectuals brought new respectability to the Right and immensely reshaped the public debate on conservatism in the United States (Nash 2009: 324). Those neoconservatives added an enormous intellectual force to the traditional practical conservatism which enabled the realignment of a popular Republican Party. The appeal of this reorientation has continued until today (Crotty 2015: 15).

Despite the intellectual consolidation that arose, the conservative tradition is still commonly associated with attributes of stupidity. *South Park* adopts such popular stereotypes in the representation of the town's conservative citizens. At the beginning of season twenty-one, the redneck protesters are assembled in a bar. They are fretting over their status in modern society when one of them brings the discussion to a halt.

Protester 8: "What's the use, Darryl? Ain't nobody taking us serious-like."

Protester 5: [*slams his table with his left hand*] "Hey waiter, this soup is too hot. I can't even eat it."

Protester 9: "I'll cool it down!" [*whips out his Confederate flag and fans the soup with it, the protesters cheer*] (S21E1).

The use of the ungrammatical compound "serious-like" alludes to the protester's low educational level. Also, the negation "ain't" is widely disapproved as being nonstandard. Generally, "ain't" connotes with the less educated stratum of American society. Whereas the first motif in this dialogue is the alleged unintelligence of people identifying as conservatives, second, the confederate flag comes into focus. The confederate flag has become a symbol of blind radicalism. The flag has been appropriated by white-supremacist and other radical right groups. The confederate flag is also often associated with racism, segregation, and a nostalgia for the Old South. Therefore, its imagery is seen as considerably problematic. Jimmy Fallon torments South Park's rightist inclination.

Jimmy Fallon: "Not surprisingly, this guy is from a predominantly white town called South Park, Colorado. Or Shitheads of America, Incorporated, I'm not sure. Yeah, if this guy is the best their town has to offer, can you imagine who he left behind?" (S19E3).

Jimmy Fallon is not surprised that the most radical conservative seen for decades originates from a "predominantly white town". Labelling South Park using these superficial characteristics reduces the town to an entirely conservative place. He collectively degrades every inhabitant of South Park, assuming that Mr. Garrison would be "the best their town has to offer". Simultaneously, he impales that the remaining townspeople are even more radical. In addition, "shithead" is a particularly vulgar insult. The rendering of the "shitheads" as a company suggests an underlying professionalism of their being shitheads. The addition "of America" extends the insult and brands all of South Park's townspeople as most stupid people in the entire nation.

Another episode in which South Park has become the bogeyman of conservative ignorance was aired in 2007. In season eleven, episode one, Randy Marsh is ostracized for having said “Nigger” on live TV. Stan often defends his father for either his extremely liberal worldview, but also his often thoughtless, rightist statements. Once again, Stan finds himself defending his father: “Listen, Token, my dad isn't a racist. He's just stupid, all right?” (S11E1). Stan makes it look like as if Randy does not make these offensive comments on purpose. Instead, Stan pins the blame on Randy's stupidity. However, the question remains: can ignorance be an excuse for insults or even unlawful behavior? In my opinion, and as the proverb says, ignorance is no excuse in law.

4.2.2. “You think an ice age can just happen all of a sudden-like?”

Paired with the social and geographical isolation of conservative groups, the common ignorance of conservatives has forwarded the growth of secluded, heterophobic communities. Conspiracy theories on global warming being nothing but a Chinese scam are not an invention of leftist media. They are for real and widespread. But what is true and real these days? For South Park's conservatives there is a simple answer to this question: only what feels true can be true. Truthiness is now an English word. Stephen Colbert has used it in his very first show. It was also Merriam-Webster's word of the year 2006 (Johnson 2010: 30). For Johnston and McAvoy (2009: 28), ‘truthiness’ is the label for a concept where political stability is not achieved through genuine knowledge supported by ‘facts’, but rather by the ‘gut feeling’. They argue that, in particular for South Park's conservative citizens, only what feels true can be true, regardless of material evidence against it. It is, indeed, a common conservative assumption that scientific data cannot be trusted. In the discussion on how to prevent the future from taking place, Chet suggests forwarding global warming “so that in the future, the polar ice caps melt, and it ushers in a new ice age” (S8E7). The rest of the rednecks do not trust his plan.

Darryl: “Chet, you are a fuckin' retard, you know that?! Even if global warming were real, which all proven scientific data shows it isn't, it would take millions of years for a climate shift to happen! You think an ice age can just happen all of a sudden-like?”

Chet: “Well I was just tryin' to be helpful.”

Darryl: “Well help yourself to a fuckin' science book, 'cause you're talkin' like a fuckin' retard!” (S8E7).

The use of the second conditional, “if [it] were real, [...] it would take millions of years”, stresses the speaker's doubt about the likelihood of that event. In general, the second conditional is used to refer to something that is impossible, because it is not true. Darryl highlights this lack of trueness by commencing his sentence with “even if”. This conjunction denotes a bare possibility. The conservatives' opposition to ‘theory’, associated with the debatable notion of ‘truthiness’, is a striking characteristic. For Honderich (1990: 21), the conservative counterpart to theory would be

'common sense'. He argues that common sense is anything that we take to be true. According to Johnston and McAvoy (2009: 34-35), *South Park* attempts to eradicate the tension between what is "right" and what is "normative" by creating its unique conservative norm of what feels "personally right". This alludes to the conservative notion that prudence and experience are better than reason and logic.

What seems interesting is Darryl's reference to scientific data, highlighting his firm conviction that his standpoint is true. The American reality proves that there is a vast range of pseudoscientific material haunting the US' media landscape and hauling in innocent conservatives looking for counterarguments.

To a large extent, the media contributes to the construction of reality. In the US, conservatism has found several media outlets to broadcast their ideas and unique theories and to create its own truths. Epstein (2007: 12) argues that the increasingly fragmented media range offers the audience the possibility to choose sources of information which confirm their political beliefs. Even though the liberal media bias has been critiqued just a decade ago, (cf. Anderson 2005: 7) the outlook in 2018 is different. As the spectrum of news channels is widened in both ideological directions, it becomes easier to hype and perpetuate fake news.

In season twenty-one, Kyle makes Butters aware of the problem with publishing phony stories: "Butters! Butters! You can't just make stuff up about us! People are thinking it's true!" (S21E4). The perception of what is true and what is not depends on various factors. In *South Park*, one of them is the omnipotence of the media, in particular social media. In season twenty-one, Coon and Friends struggle with launching their superhero franchise. They blame Professor Chaos and his fake news farm for their lack of success.

Cartman: "It's us, your heroes, Coon and Friends. We're uhm, just wondering why you stopped following us on Instagram?"

Wilson: "Because you victimize innocent people and poop in little girls' mouths."

Cartman: "That's not true, Wilson. We're Coon and Friends, not Harvey Weinstein."

Wilson: "Facebook says it's true."

Cartman: "But it's NOT true."

Wilson: "But Facebook says it's true."

Cartman: [*gets in his face*] "Okay, but it's NOT true, and you need to have your own fucking brain and decide shit for yourself!" (S21E4).

The adjective "true" comes up five times in this short scene. Cartman emphasizes the "not" by a change in pitch and speech volume. He wants to sort things out and clarify that the allegations made about Coon and Friends on Facebook are, in his words, not true. The cross-reference to Hollywood's sexual harassment scandal situates the episode in its present-day sociopolitical context. The media has assumed an instrumental role in shaping the public's concept of truth and reality. In the end, Cartman argues that the others need to "decide shit" for themselves. His

command ties in with the "the issue of truthiness" again. Nobody knows what to believe anymore. The realization how much fake news circulates and penetrates mainstream media makes people even more skeptical of information. Stephen reflects on the escalating situation: "Well, look, we all know there's a lot of mixing of truth and fiction that's been on Facebook lately, and children lack the cognitive ability to determine what's true and what isn't on Facebook" (S21E4). Apparently, not only children are deceived by the media's strategies. South Park's citizens, the slightly satirized while greatly grotesque reflection of conservative Americans, are no longer able to define what is true and what is fake. Aberbach (2017: 71) appropriately observes that ideological identification is seemingly strong enough among a large proportion of the American public to blur the line between fact and fiction to a large extent. After all, the philosophy of relativism states that our understanding of the world depends on our own circumstances, experiences, and identity. Following this reasoning, truth is by no means absolute. But how to handle a claim like: circles are square. To my mind, there are universal truths, invariable and unalterable facts. However, personal and emotional beliefs are key logical problems everybody experiences. Tweek sums up the relevance of personal and emotional involvement: "There you go again! Stop preaching facts to me! It's not what I need!" (S21E2). Often, evidence and arguments don't convince us to let go of personal beliefs (Arp 2007: 52). Still, I am of the opinion that you cannot logically argue against the existence of some natural laws. That is why the claim for truthiness is flawed and unreasonable.

4.2.3. "It's like a witch pursuit thingy"

The conservative tradition is not entirely blameless in earning its bad reputation. Seemingly, conservatives display a habit of holding on to non-justifiable arguments. Some conservatives, even higher ranked ones, frequently justify this by claiming "I have a right to my opinion", according to Johnson (2010: 33). But Johnson (2010: 35) continues that, nonetheless, we do not have a right to an opinion we cannot defend. Also, there is no justification for having an opinion which is contrary to fact. In connection with this, the ghastly neologism "alternative facts" enjoys great unpopularity.

Generally speaking, the statement "I have a right to my opinion" is a logical fallacy. Arp (2010: 15) explains: "A fallacy is faulty reasoning that inappropriately or incorrectly draws a conclusion from evidence that does not support the conclusion". The statement is problematic as it is often exploited to maintain a factually indefensible standpoint. Cartman repeatedly proves that he is *South Park*'s personification of logical fallacy:

Wendy: "Instead of booing my opinion, why don't you make a constructive argument?!"
Cartman: "I'm not booing your opinion, I'm booing your report topic. No one even knows what a refewgee is. Boo, booben, boo!" (S17E2).

The problem of the “I have a right to my opinion” argument is that the advocates of this idea are often unwilling to grant this right to people with opposing views. In the episode “Informative Murder Porn” (S17E2) Cartman interrupts Wendy every single time she starts to make a comment. By consistently booing her, Cartman delegitimizes her standpoint and denies her the chance for logical argumentation. Regarding people firmly believing and insisting that Barack Obama was not born in the US, Aberbach (2017: 71) refers to interesting words by late New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (2003): “While we are all entitled to our own opinions, we are not entitled to our own facts.”

Even though everybody has a right to their opinion, some views are simply too distasteful or outrageous to share with the public. Yet, people who are constantly surrounded by like-minded people are sometimes unable to recognize the deviancy of their views. The opinions and practices which circulate in their communities are normalized. *South Park*’s season twenty-one repeatedly refers to the sexual harassment allegations regarding Harvey Weinstein. This person’s conduct is of course a very exaggerated example, and I am not saying that I put him on an equal footing with political conservatives. However, it underlines that some worldviews, for instance about women and marginalized groups, have simply become unacceptable in a 21st century United States.

Gerald: “Hey Randy.”

Randy: “Sup guys?”

Ryan: “You know, just getting a bunch of shit for being witches.”

Randy: “I know, right? It's like, there's one awful witch who wants to kill everybody, so now they're coming after all of us. This is like a witch... thingy.”

Stuart: “It's like a witch pursuit thingy.”

Randy: “A witch uhhh-“

Gerald: “It's a witch chase and shoot 'em up.”

Randy: “Yeah, that's what it is!” (S21E6).

The “witch pursuit thingy” is currently a recurring topic in American politics. Especially President Trump feels as if he and his concerns are not taken seriously and his actions are demonized. The “witch pursuit thingy” argument mirrors the efforts of liberals to push conservative opinions outside the realm of acceptable political discourse. Some conservative issues are commonly branded as unacceptable and impossible to incorporate into mainstream politics. However, the current polarization has dulled people’s sensitivity for traditionally delicate issues. The White House administration lowered the bar of what has become acceptable.

We have now come full circle. The imbalance of chapter 4.1. and chapter 4.2. is not coincidental but is caused by the actual disparity of *South Park*’s covering of the two political fractions. The political left appears to be a more convenient target for parody. The rejection of liberal ideas on the one hand, and the endorsement of conservative opinions on the other, make *South Park* a right-leaning place. Finally, the title of this chapter “I googled South Park before I

CHAPTER IV: “I googled South Park before I came here, and I cannot believe the shit you're getting away with!”

came here, and I cannot believe the shit you're getting away with!” (S19E1) encapsulates the problematic nature of the bipolar political landscape of the US.

CHAPTER V: “Our nation is divided like never before”

In this chapter, I want to examine the relations of difference and the effects of difference in the social structures of *South Park*. I want to focus on two major fallouts of political polarization. First, the disappearance of the political center makes compromise seem almost impossible. Second, the phenomenon of affective polarization increases cross-partisan hostility and incites antagonistic negative campaigning. Another issue deepening the ideological trench are the factors determining ideological identification. Family socialization plays an immense role in ideological identification and leads to generational stability.

“Our nation is divided like never before” (S20E1). This wording emanates from the first episode of season 20, aired on September 14, 2016, in which Joe Biden addresses his fellow senators in a speech:

“Fellow Senators, our nation is divided like never before. While people everywhere fight for their voices to be heard, perhaps it is time for us to consider that our national anthem needs to be changed. Americans need an anthem that inspires and excites, an anthem that has something for everyone while still paying tribute to what it once was. I believe there's only one person capable of achieving this. [*clicks on a handheld button and the picture behind him changes*] J.J. Abrams” (S20E1).

The senators are thrilled by Biden’s brilliant idea. *South Park* effectively plays with viewer expectation. “While people everywhere fight for their voices to be heard, perhaps it is time for us to consider that [something] needs to be changed” (S20E1). Why it is of all things the national anthem which needs to be changed, contradicts the viewer’s expectations about what to hear. Joe Biden continues: “He saved Star Wars, and now we will ask him to save our country” (S20E1). With this comment, the makers of *South Park* refer to the reboot of the Star Wars movie “The Force Awakens” which was released in 2015. Everyone, fans and Star Wars novices alike, agreed on this being a great reboot, as it preserves a lot of the original movie.

Having all agreed on Biden’s ingenious plan, the Senators head to the domicile of J.J. Abrams. One Senator pleadingly approaches Mr. Abrams: “We all want something new and that makes us remember the things we lost. We want to 'member! We need your 'member berries!” (S20E1). This plead boils down new conservatism to the essence. The longing for something lost. The longing for remembering. But what is the significance of “We all want something new” in this statement? The short answer is: the new national anthem should appeal to *everybody* in America. The country is already divided, what it needs is a unifying factor, a common denominator. The conjunction “and” however introduces a paradox: How can something new at the same time still endorse reverence for the past? The senator’s plead illustrates the controversy between future-oriented *and* backward-looking policies. Even though the politicians of the *South Park* universe realize the need for change, retrogressive spirit infuses their plans.

This innovative but still conservative intention to unify the country is underlined by the media. In particular, news coverages on the Senate’s plan adopt and repeat the senators’ wording and thereby their constructed reality. A news anchor announces: “And as our country seems to be more and more divided, the only hope is that J.J. Abrams’ new national anthem will appeal to everyone and bring back those nostalgic member berries we know and love” (S20E1). The common narrative of a divided nation is broadcast here. Many twenty-first century authors confirm that the country is more divided ideologically than just a generation ago (Abramowitz 2015, Carsey & Layman 2015, Galston & Nivola 2006, Stonecash 2015). Supposedly, the sources for such a division are substantive, long-developing, and unlikely to disappear soon (Stonecash 2015: 69). The main reasons for this development are a long-term partisan realignment and the persistent divisions of Democratic and Republican voters by race, religious beliefs, ideological orientation, and policy preferences (Stonecash 2015, Abramowitz 2015: 80). As a result, ideological overlap between the political parties has practically disappeared, and the increase of partisan supermajorities in “safe” districts pushes candidates away from the political center. According to Crotty (2015: 329), the development of a sprawling two-party system has critically restricted the US’ capacity to represent all subdivisions of the electorate.

The bipolar division in the American electorate goes as deep as to refer to it as ‘polarization’. The principle underlying the concept of political polarization is adapted from physics. It can be compared to magnetic or electric polarity with opposing force fields moving in the exact opposite direction (Crotty 2015: 3). The term is intended to describe the condition of hyper-partisan or hyper-ideological extremism and representational imbalance, leading to institutional paralysis (Crotty 2015: 1). Polarization, Epstein (2007: 1) argues, can take several forms, for example the bimodal distribution of ideologies, rather than as a left-to-right continuum. Polarization hints at an antagonism that goes beyond political parties and stretches to the very limits of the American ideological spectrum (Crotty 2015: 1). Accordingly, the American nation is not only “divided like never before” (S20E1) but also politically and ideologically polarized.

5.1. “Everyone’s divided. Nobody’s getting along”

The backwash of increasing political and ideological polarization is problematic. One of its effects is the perceived disappearance of the political center. As partisan and ideological identification become more and more aligned, moderate positions are consumed by the system. Hare and Poole (2015: 32) note that the ideological center in Congress, which used to spur major policy reforms, has “hollowed out”. They say that centrists are, in general, underrepresented in the electorate, as they are less likely to be politically engaged as those who identify with ideological directions (Hare & Poole 2015: 33). McCarty (2015: 3) also observes an asymmetry in polarization, that the

Republican Party's movement to the right of the political spectrum was decisive for the divergence between the two parties. The decline in centrists is also problematic, as they have been known for bridging the parties and negotiating indispensable compromises (Epstein 2007: 3). Political elites, for instance presidential candidates, are incited by the polarization of the party system to move further away from the center to win elections and voters. As a result, center positions seem to have disappeared, at least in political elites. This growing polarization also materializes in *South Park*'s small-scale universe:

Stan: "What happened, Dad?" [*Randy walks up to the bed*] "Everything's upside down." [*Randy sits*] "Everyone's taking sides and splitting into groups." [*thoughtfully*] "Everything sucks."

Randy: [*rubs the back of his neck*] "Yeah, everything sucks. [*lowers his hand*] Everyone's divided. Nobody's getting along. And there's people like your MOTHER who are thinking of voting for a DOUCHE because she doesn't have a BRAIN."

Sharon: [*off screen*] "Go to hell, Randy!" (S20E3).

In this short scene both, Stan and Randy, express their worries about the division and splitting they sense in their surroundings. Stan is actually talking about his school environment in which all the girls turn against the boys. On the other hand, Randy expresses his worries about the political situation. *South Park*'s creators have a comic take on Randy's observation that "[n]obody's getting along". Just seconds after this statement Randy denigrates his wife Sharon for her political beliefs, himself displaying the deepening partisan divisions. The lexical choices "taking sides", "splitting", and "divided" strongly accentuate the polarizing forces at play. This strong notion of dividedness makes compromise seem impossible. What has become a commonplace belief in contemporary American politics is that there is only one correct answer, either left or right. This also reflects in *South Park*, as in most of the townspeople's struggles there seems to be no alternative solution. However, the rejection of compromise ultimately leads to a dysfunctional political system (Crotty 2015: 1).

Frequently, the two-party system is identified as the root of solidifying polarization and the disappearance of moderate political positions. Since the two-party system does not adequately represent the electorate, Fresia (1986: 251) thinks it is useless and can be considered a fraud to the electorate. Potok (2004: 42) is concerned that the American two-party system complicates tackling the interests and anxieties of extreme groups within mainstream politics. The two-party system contributes to the isolation of extremists, instead of integrating them into the political mechanism, where their ideologies would be softened (cf. Potok 2004: 42). Still, smaller, countermovement-like parties usually implode instantly, as the issues they represent often become incorporated into mainstream politics. As soon as those issues become publicly acceptable, one of the two major parties adopts the minority group's ideas. Consequently, the major parties drain off the support of

minority parties (Kayden & Mahe 1985: 144). The thereby increasing dysfunctionality of the American electoral system distresses Stan. Stan has expressed his reservations about the two-party system in one of *South Park*’s earlier episodes “Douche and Turd” (S8E8, October 2004) and resumes this issue in season twenty:

Stan: “I just don't understand why every four years you people freak out over whether to vote for a giant douche or a turd sandwich.”

Randy: [*snidely*] “Because we're Americans. 'Cause this is America.”

Stan: “Why are we doing this again? Why are we back to giant douche and turd sandwich?” (S20E1).

Randy’s generic justification “‘Cause this is America” is unsatisfactory for Stan. Even though it is inherent to the American political system that voting requires a polar decision, the extremity of this choice is especially substantial in presidential elections where the ideological orientation of the party condenses into one representative. In line with Stan’s argumentation, there is no alternative. There is no center solution. It is either douche or turd. However, as a voter one is still compelled to decide for either side, regardless of how contrary these are. Without doubt, what can be observed in contemporary American politics is that ideology and party have become more closely related. Every party represents a clear ideology and policy preference (Epstein 2007: 5). This visible ideological polarization at least facilitates the voters to sort alongside these lines. However, while the ideologies of Americans drift farther apart, they increasingly visualize their opponents as enemies.

5.2. “What the hell is wrong with people?”

The ongoing bipolar division of society provokes tensions between the opposing political camps. *South Park* regularly contrast such extreme opposing standpoints in a black and white fashion, for instance in season seven, episode four, when South Park’s pro- and anti-war protesters clash. Skeeter suggests: “Don't you see? All this dividin' up the town, it's just ridiculous. What we really should be doing, is just beatin' the hell out of each other like we were” (S7E4).

Skeeter designates the rational division of the town as ridiculous. Instead, he proposes that the opposing sides should give free rein to their rage. Skeeter surrenders to the essentialist premise that people are simply born passionate and competitive beings. This premise legitimizes emotional responses to politics. When opposing political views encroach on non-political areas and influence the ways in which individuals perceive others, we call it ‘affective polarization’. Affective polarization substantiates the tendency of people identifying as Republicans or Democrats to view opposing partisans negatively (Iyengar & Westwood 2015: 691). These views grow out of the classification of oppositional partisans as outgroup and copartisans as ingroup (Iyengar & Westwood 2015: 691). According to Mason (2015: 131), partisans do not have to represent wildly

extreme issue positions in order to be biased against and angry at their opponents. Instead, aligned partisan identities suffice to generate high levels of bias and anger. Mason (2015: 55) adds that party polarization is "a social process, where partisans are driven by a growing team spirit that is disconnected from policy considerations". Therefore, the experience of group-membership is able to trigger negative evaluations of the outgroup.

5.2.1. "You can't possibly be thinking about voting for the douche?!"

In my opinion, affective polarization increases cross-partisan hostility. Fifty years ago, American parties were described as being weak and not contributing to social cohesion at all. Today, US American party identification influences people's behavior not only in the political domain, but also in personal contexts (Iyengar & Westwood 2015: 705). The invasion of personal contexts becomes obvious in *South Park*'s season twenty, when the political debate expands to the Marsh family's dinner table.

Randy: "What the hell is wrong with people?! They really think that a giant douche should be President?? It's insane!"

Sharon: "Why'd you say I'd be voting for the turd sandwich, Randy? You haven't even talked to me about it."

Randy: "You can't possibly be thinking about voting for the douche?!" (S20E1).

Randy does not understand the standpoint of anyone who votes for another candidate than him. His argument is however unfounded and the justification "it's insane" not warranted. Moreover, the modality in "can't possibly be thinking" carries evaluative load and functions as an intensifying strategy. At the same time, Randy seeks to uphold his authority position as the head of the family. On the level of interpretation, Randy's outcry can be read as his reaction to feeling threatened from different directions. First of all, there is discord within his inner social circle and the threat to his status as patriarch. But even more prominently, Randy sees a threat to his party, his preferred team. Mason (2015: 130) observes that the anger felt by partisans in the face of a threat to their party's status is not primarily anger at the prospect that they won't be able to implement their desired issue. Rather, they are enraged because someone threatens their team. Consequently, the stronger their affiliation with the team, the stronger the emotional reaction to the threat, independent of how intense their issue positions are.

Randy extends the argument to the wider circle of the public sphere. In the belief that his friends would agree with him, Randy vents his anger at Skeeter's Wine Bar.

Randy: "What is wrong with people, huh?! How can they vote against a turd sandwich more than a giant douche?! It's senseless!"

Stephen "Randy, you gotta calm down."

Randy: [*grabs onto Stephen*] "How can anyone be calm at a time like this?! [*lets go*] People actually think a turd is worse than a douche!" (S20E1).

Randy interrupts the townsmen’s nexus of praxis, meeting for a drink, by digging into the polarizing political debate. Repetition of the lexical bundle “what is wrong with people” ties Randy’s utterance to previous statements. Most striking is Randy’s construction of the outgroup as “people”. Establishing a label for the members of the outgroup is a referential strategy, concerning the representation of self and other. Moreover, Randy does not cast his vote *for* somebody, but *against* the “worse” option. This is an interesting observation concerning the negative portrayal of outgroups. Randy’s essentialist bias surfaces in the above utterance. Instead of rationally reflecting his own political position, he blindly attacks his opponents. The outgroup, the others, are represented as a menace to the ingroup. Mason (2015: 130) refers to studies that prove that there is something inherent to group membership that automatically biases people in their assessment of outgroups. When the group’s status appears to be threatened, people become defensive (Mason 2015: 58). Abramowitz (2010: 170) points out that Democrats and Republicans do not only hold opposing views on a wide range of issues, but they also dislike and mistrust the leaders and members of the opposing party. As partisan and ideological identities strengthen and become more aligned, prejudice against partisan opponents increases (Mason 2015: 56). Mason’s (2015) research shows that political identities forward social polarization more rapidly than they polarize issue opinions. As a result, Mason claims that Americans live in a nation of partisans who behave like they disagree much more than they actually do. “And they are going to do that with all the rationality, reserve and emotional composure of a rabid sports fan at a championship game” (Mason 2015: 59). Mason (2015: 57) is convinced that people with strong and overlapping political identities are more likely to be angry at opposing candidates, especially during presidential elections. Randy seems to be *South Park*’s confirmation of these theories. For him, politics is a determinative factor, directing his social intercourse. The realization that some of his fellows do not share his political values, enrages Randy.

Randy: “Okay, what?! The fuck?! Is wrong with you people?! I just saw a new poll that says more and more of you are thinking about voting for that douche!”

Stephen: “Some are. A lot of people like what he has to say, alright?”

Randy: “You’re tellin’ me that after that debate, you still wanna vote for that guy?!”

Stephen: “More than ever.”

Ryan Valmer: “Yyyup.”

Randy: “Did you see the same debate I saw?!” (S20E3).

The repetition of the “what is wrong with you” motif accentuates Randy’s prevailing shocked disbelief. This time, the argument is additionally intensified by the preceding swearwords expressing ultimate despair on Randy’s part. By asking whether the other men saw the same debate he did, Randy expresses his struggle understanding their viewpoint. Even though all of them were exposed to the same input, their perspectives and reactions are predetermined by partisan identity.

McCarty (2015: 5) also comments on the development that a voter’s partisanship has become a more predictable factor of his or her issue positions. Voters are, in addition, more homogeneously sorted within the party system. Conservative voters are now more likely to be Republicans, and liberal voters to be Democrats, than two generations ago (McCarty 2015: 5). Fiorina and Levendusky (2006: 69) also confirm that Americans’ party affiliation has become more closely attached to their ideological self-classification.

Iyengar and Westwood (2015: 691) claim that the mere identification with a group in a competitive environment, regardless of how trivial this competitive environment may be, usually sparks negative evaluations of the outgroup. Group affiliation is said to be rooted in human nature. For generations, group dynamics has been the hobbyhorse of social science research. Many social psychology experiments demonstrate that any form of group membership, even if based on the most trivial shared characteristics, triggers negative evaluations of the outgroup. Accordingly, group-based affect can be seen as an ingrained human response (Iyengar et.al. 2012: 407). In addition, humans tend to overestimate the distinctiveness of rival groups, i.e. “men and women, blacks and whites, Israelis and Palestinians, and, in our case, Democrats and Republicans” (Levendusky & Malhotra 2015: 107). After all, partisanship appears as the most prominent political identity. This is because parties directly compete for power in the political realm. Competition, as mentioned above, increases the salience of competing group identities (Mason 2015: 130). Lee (2015: 78) concludes, that not only ideological polarization, but also the competition for power contributes to America’s confrontational contemporary politics. Involvement in politics is often based on the desire of wanting one’s party, one’s team, to win, and only in part to achieve favored policy outcomes (Mason 2015: 7). Such a competitive environment is provided by political campaigns which become the arena for affective polarization.

5.2.2. “You've got a dumpy butt, and seven chins”

The increasing cross-partisan hostility fosters the implementation of negative campaigning. Especially presidential campaigns have become enormously antagonistic. Iyengar and Westwood (2015: 691) confirm this increasing hostility across party lines in contemporary American politics. Since the 1980s, negative views on the out party have risen sharply among people who identify themselves with one or the other party. Since then, American presidential campaigns have become more antagonistic and harder to ignore. There can be no doubt about the increased negativity of campaign rhetoric. At least since the presidential campaign leading up to the election of 2016, the extreme reality in American politics outran *South Park*’s hyperbolic microcosm. However, the makers of *South Park* still managed to exaggerate the hyper-partisan and tense climate in America. In particular, the recurrent debates between the douche, Mr. Garrison, and the turd sandwich, a

fictionalized Ms. Clinton, achieved a sublime satirical tone. One example is the following extract of one of the two opponents' televised debates:

Clinton: "Keeping our country save has become more and more difficult, but I believe there are several things that we can--"

Garrison: "No! You shut the hell up! You've got a dumpy butt, and seven chins. Syrian refugees are all terrorists!"

Clinton: "I know that our government needs to take a harder look at all- "

Garrison: "Yeah well, it's pretty hard to look at you! We can all agree on that!"

Jenner: [*interrupting*] "She looks like a donkey took a shit in her face" [*goes backstage again*] (S19E8).

Mr. Garrison directly attacks his opponent by mocking her physical characteristics. In doing so, he interrupts Ms. Clinton, thereby transgressing the rules of politeness. Moreover, Mr. Garrison's and his running mate Caitlyn Jenner violate the conversational maxim of relevance, as their comments do not contribute to a meaningful conversation. Likewise, Mr. Garrison's statement that "Syrian refugees are all terrorists" is not adequately warranted and therefore violates the maxim of quality. The goal of the violation of conversational strategies is to distract the audience, but primarily to throw mud at Ms. Clinton. This degradation off the opponent is a common strategy of negative campaigning. As Iyengar et.al. (2012: 408) observe, candidates routinely spend more time attacking their opponents than promoting themselves. Negative advertising in campaigns might attract partisan voters, as they might appreciate the pointed attacks. On the other hand, such techniques might alienate more moderate or independent voters, as they grow weary of the angry sniping and immature aggressions (Hetherington 2006: 3). The permanent exposure to negative campaigns is a factor contributing to affective polarization. In particular, the tendency of the media to recycle the candidates' negative messages confirms partisans' suspicions about opposing partisans (Iyengar et.al. 2012: 427). In general, according to Hetherington (2006: 3), negative information has more effect than positive information as it raises the specter of risk and with it anxiety. Ultimately, anxiety is known as a strong, mobilizing force, especially regarding conservative ideologies.

What I consider noteworthy in this respect is that, after episodes filled with torrents of hatred, Mr. Garrison's campaign strategy switches completely. When he realizes that he is not prepared to become president, he tries to convince voters of his incapability to govern a country:

Garrison: "Please, if you care at all about the future of our country, vote for her. Okay? She's the one who at least has some experience. She, she's not as bad as you think, I promise. And unlike me, she's actually capable of running this country."

Clinton: "...My opponent is a liar and he cannot be trusted." (S20E3).

Mr. Garrison begins to cheapen himself in order to present his opponent in a more positive light. By turning the negative campaigning into praising his opponent, he subverts an established

convention. However, Mr. Garrison still pitches Ms. Clinton in relation to himself, after all still claiming the authority himself. His promise alone is what should make voters believe she is "not as bad as you think". Mr. Garrison's persuasive attempts are however overthrown when Ms. Clinton contradicts him. She thoughtlessly follows the instructions of her advisors. The tactics of negative campaigning has become so entrenched in American politics that any deviation from it is unanticipated. But not only on the national level, also in the more domestic arena do partisans impute negative traits to adherents of the opposing party. This is a result of affective polarization having invaded interpersonal relations. In addition to seeing members of the opposing party more critically, citizens often doubt the motives of politicians from the opposing party (Iyengar & Westwood 2015: 691). Iyengar and Westwood (2015: 692) say that even though there is only mixed evidence of sharp ideological and partisan division among the American population, their increasing dislike of people and groups on the other side of the political border is evident. Partisan and ideological identification are ranked amongst the strongest discriminating factors in America, beside racial and class factors.

5.3. "Look, my son is a patriot and LOVES his country!"

The most powerful propagator for partisan identification is, after all, the family. Childhood socialization and the generational passing on of political and ideological values contribute to the durability of ideologies. South Park's families are prime examples for the generational transfer of political identity and ideology. The fathers are particularly keen on having their sons on their side.

Skeeter: "See? I told you they had your son."

Stuart: "Kenny. What are you doing over here with all these un-American traitors?!"

Kenny: "(I'm doing my homework.)"

Randy: "The boys are going to give a presentation at our rally about how the Founding Fathers would agree with our right to protest"! [*the war supporters clamor against Randy*]

Stan: "Actually, we hadn't really come to a decision--"

Stuart: "Look! My son is a patriot and LOVES his country!" [*grabs Kenny's jacket*] "Come on, Kenny!"

Kenny: "(But Dad, I-)"

Stuart: "NOW!" (S7E4).

While the townspeople are engaged in their pro- respectively anti-war protests, the boys' homework is to write a report on what the Founding Fathers' perspective on the issue would have been. Both, Randy and Stuart try to win their sons over to their sides. Randy takes it for granted that Stan and his friends are going to support his standpoint. Similarly, Stuart speaks for his son and urges him to leave. The above scene illustrates how individual identity is socially imposed. I believe that identity is not inherent but is instead acquired. Accordingly, childhood socialization and the generational passing on of political and ideological values are factors contributing to

political identification. Kayden and Mahe (1985: 158) state that “[t]he most important influence in the development of partisanship is the family”. They add that education, peer groups, and one’s experience and place in the world are influential in the development of political attitudes too. For them, it is surprising how durable the attitudes learnt as a child about authority and social responsibility are (Kayden & Mahe 1985: 158). Of course, there can be generation gaps sometimes. Still, the acquisition of identity always requires the integration of past experience, present events and future visions. These are factors that influence many domains of our lives.

Another worthwhile approach is considering the construction of identity in terms of opposition and binaries. Stuart refers to the anti-war protesters as “un-American traitors” (S7E4). Earlier in the episode Skeeter calls them: “un-American bastards!” (S7E4). We can observe that the outgroup is constructed using anti-language, defining what it is not. The identity, Stuart and the other conservatives want to pass on to their descendants, is the “American” identity. Everything and everybody that transgresses the naturalized norm of the American is excluded from this imagined community and consequently labelled un-American. Frank (2004: 27) has an interesting observation about the dividedness of America: “What divides Americans is *authenticity*, not something hard and ugly like economics” [original emphasis]. The debate is about what and who is “truly” American and what is not. However, issue positions also contribute to a further polarization of the two opposing fractions.

CHAPTER VI: “Now I have chosen my side: that which I believe is best for all”

In past eras, political parties only polarized on one political issue at a time, for instance, the abolition of slavery or civil rights. However, today’s political polarization takes place on many levels. Carsey and Layman (2015: 30) claim that “Where parties in earlier periods may have found many areas of agreement even as they fought bitterly over some issues, parties today disagree on virtually everything”. This type of multi-issue polarization has been termed “conflict extension”. Carsey and Layman (2015: 23-24) point out that polarization has been the “natural state of American politics” since the formation of the major American parties at the end of the 18th century. This polarization has been along the lines of social class up until the 1940s (Burnham 2015: 45). Now, the polarization looks inherently different, with ideology and political and social issues being the main contributors. Carsey and Layman (2015: 25-28) see the contemporary polarization somewhat different, due to conflict extension. The polarizing conflicts extend on several levels, in particular concerning domestic policy agenda.¹³

Paulson (2015: 92) names a number of matters which are ideologically polarizing in American politics: structural deficit in the federal budget, health care and health insurance reform, the decline of manufacturing as an employer and the rising unemployment, energy policy, climate change and the environment. Nash (2009: 325) says that, besides sharing foreign policy and economic beliefs, conservatives’ preoccupation often lays in the “social issues” such as abortion, school prayer, pornography, sexual deviancy. All of those issues, and more, are enormously polarizing in American politics. Apart from agricultural and transportation interests, which still seem to be negotiated in terms of regional and local involvement, almost all political conflict is divided along the liberal-conservative line (Epstein 2007: 3). On each of those issues, the constitutional separation of powers acts against the advocates of change. By the beginning of the 2000s, voters overlap between the two parties has almost disappeared (Aberbach 2017: 73). Over the last half century, factors like feminism, suffrage for African Americans, and gay rights have led to a stronger ideological polarization of the country. Right now, America is in a strictly partisan and ideological political climate. Different belief systems, governing principles and objectives are reflected in the two parties and fuel the increasing polarization of society (cf. Crotty 2015: 25-26). The two parties are no longer internally divided but realigned along bipolar ideological lines.

The title for this chapter, “Now I have chosen my side: that which I believe is best for all”, is from season seventeen, episode eight (S17E8). As console wars are heating up in South Park,

¹³ Fresia (1986: 197) and Kayden and Mahe (1985: 143) point towards the unlikeliness of alternative movements to usurp power in the US.

the boys take sides either for PlayStation 4 or for the Xbox One. The console wars are *South Park*’s satirical replication of America’s multi-issue polarization and the either-or principle. For instance, economic issues have become an “either-or” issue (Paulson 2015: 93). As economic growth is stagnating in the US, somebody’s gain is always connected to somebody else’s loss. Another interesting point that Paulson makes is that of zero-sum politics. Paulson (2015: 92) makes clear that twenty-first century America is a low-growth society. Also, with moral issues the choice is either or. For ideological individuals there is no middle course. As soon as a person’s ideological and partisan orientation become aligned, the person becomes more convinced that their position is the only legitimate one. The issues I am going to discuss below all share this characteristic. *South Park* interacts in multiple ways with contemporary ideology and renegotiates ideology. Polarization as the bimodal distribution of ideologies instead of a left-to-right continuum has complicated US policy-making. Below I will examine some examples of this issue polarization as portrayed in *South Park*.

6.1. “At least this man’s trying to save Christmas”

Traditional values and religious morals play a big role in American society and in *South Park*’s microcosm. For the more traditionally oriented segment of society, the decision in elections often comes down to who of the candidates will be more likely to preserve the nation’s status quo. Dueck (2007: 224) calls religion one of “the key cultural and philosophical issues consistently dealt with in *South Park*”. Basically, man is a religious animal, and religion is the foundation of civil society. To the present day, a divine sanction infuses the legitimate, existing, social order (Huntington 1957: 456). Resultingly, the development of a secular mass society, makes conservatives want a return to traditional religious morals (Nash 2009: 320). Thompson (2007: 10) has a similar view; he ascribes the following characteristics to New Conservatism: “A renewed respect of institutional authority in politics as well as for the authority of tradition (i.e., religion) in culture and personal life, and a crude brand of nationalism.” Concerning religious and partisan identity, Epstein (2007: 11) observes that evangelical Christians have strong ties to the Republican party. Meanwhile, more secular voters tend to lean towards a Democratic vote. She claims that parties increasingly use strategies to take advantage of these differences. With issues related to religion, it appears harder to find common ground. Consequently, political issues which engage religious-tinged argumentation foster polarization. Kellstedt and Guth (2015: 179) list a number of social issues which continuously divide religious divisions. Abortion, stem cell research, and gay rights seem to be focal contentious points. On all these issues, the religious divide is not so much between Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, but rather between traditionalists and modernists (Dionne 2006: 176). Dionne (2006: 205) says that while liberals and conservatives may fight over social issues,

gay marriage or abortion, they still wholeheartedly agree on what television programs their children should not watch, what websites they should not visit, and what video games they should not play. In *South Park*, that’s the case too.

6.1.1. “We can't let the religious right corrupt our kids”

First and foremost, polarization shows in the debate about the role religion should and can play in connection with the state. Even though, the American Republic has been comparatively secular from the onset, traditionalists and conservatives still advocate the persistence of “God” in official statements. On the other hand, liberals increasingly condemn religious references as they see them as offensive and exclusive. *South Park* frequently mediates different religious identities. Even though its core cast only features one non-Christian family, the Broflovskis, faith and spirituality play a big role in *South Park*. The first verse of *South Park*’s theme song alludes to the townspeople’s traditionalist disposition.

“Friendly faces everywhere
Humble folks without temptation”.

The wording “without temptation” reminds of a section of the Lord’s Prayer: “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” *South Park*’s citizens originally see their town as a morally unflawed place. Indeed, people with behavior branded as deviant, e.g. homosexuals, single parents, are the exception rather than the rule in *South Park*’s closely-knit social network. In *South Park*, the nuclear family is still the norm. But there are threats to the known and loved order. In season six, the Roman Catholic religion, an until then sacrosanct institution, is challenged. After the escalating debate and accumulating news reports on priests molesting young boys, *South Park*’s townspeople become skeptical towards the values of their Church. They quickly decide to convert to atheism.

Randy: “You know, I think we've just had it with the Church. All the horrible things they've done to kids, I... I think I'm gonna become an atheist!”
Richard: “That's a good idea. I'm gonna be an atheist too.”
Linda: “Let's all be atheists!”
All: “Yeah, yeah, alright.”
Man: “If there was a god, why would he let our kids be molested in the first place?”
Stephen: “Yeah, let's kill God, yeah!”
Randy: “Well uh, let's, let's just be atheists” (S6E8).

The above example is typical of how easily *South Park*’s townspeople are put off their stride. At the slightest disruption of their long-established belief system, they bolt. The abandonment of Catholicism seems to be an extreme reaction to developments on the elite level. This radical solution is emphasized by Stephen’s enthusiastic proclamation to kill God. The “if there was a

god" argument is logically flawed. This fallacy is a prime example of what leads people to jump to conclusions. Especially matters concerning religion are often sensitive topics. As traditional religious values fail to keep up with the times, people with a more liberal outlook are alienated by them. The wish is strong that the Church should keep out of personal affairs. South Park's Priest, Maxi, has a more modernist position to how the Church should appeal to people.

Maxi: "People are losing faith because they don't see how what you've turned the religion into applies to them! They've lost touch with any idea of any kind of religion, and when they have no mythology to try and live their lives by, well, they just start spewing a bunch of crap out of their mouths!" (S6E8).

The final subordinate clause can be understood with reference to the background narrative in episode eight of season six, which is people eating via their assholes and defecating through their mouths. Via this vulgar metaphor, *South Park* calls attention to the illogical reasoning often associated with religious claims. To me, it seems that the forcible separation from all religious content is equally illogical and fallacious. Once more, the question arises whether steering a middle course would be more desirable. However, Catholicism and liberalism seem to be incompatible in many regards. Priest Maxi tries to enlighten his fellow priests: "Look, I, I'm proud to be a Catholic. But I'm a Catholic in the real world. In today's world! It's time for you all to do that, too. It is time... for change" (S6E8). For himself, Maxi has found a way to mediate between his religious belief and the challenges of day-to-day life. By referring to the "real world" and "today's world" he hints at the discrepancy between modern-day reality and conservative notions of an imagined community oriented towards the past. Religious and political conservatism share this common ground of traditionalism and opposition to change. In many respects, the two ideologies intertwine. In the political arena, it is conservatives who manage to maintain the religious entrenchment in certain areas. This alliance has preserved a Christian color in an otherwise increasingly multicultural America. In *South Park*, the parents express their concerns about raising their children as atheists in a Christian society.

Man: "You know, for Martha and I, we're, we're worried we might have a hard time raising our son atheist. I mean [...] it could end up being very difficult raising an atheist child in such a Christian society. [...] I feel that everywhere my poor son goes he's being persecuted for his beliefs" (S6E8).

Richard: "That's true. If I'm gonna raise my son to be atheist, I don't want him saying "under God" every day at school. That could really damage him. "Under God" should be taken out of the [...] Pledge of Allegiance."

Randy: "That's right, I agree. And it should be taken off of money as well." [*gets angry*] "The religious right in this country is trying to force our children to believe what they bel[ieve]- [...] And we can't let the religious right corrupt our kids" (S6E8).

Above all, the parents' exchange of ideas is highly hypocritical, since they have not even lived as atheists for a full week. Consequently, the arguments they make are far-fetched and fictitious. Still,

their language appears to be tentative, expressed by the use of the modals “could” and “should” and also by the hedging expressions “I mean” and “I feel”. The rhetoric they apply brings the debate down to a very personal level and refers to their immediate life experience. By contrast, some of their arguments expand to the national level. The “In God We Trust” statement on the twenty-dollar bill, similar to school prayers, has often been criticized as a violation of the First Amendment to the Constitution.¹⁴ The rhetoric changes and brings in stronger, more persuasive verbs such as “persecute”, “force”, and “corrupt”. Those means are intended to verbally strengthen and legitimize the parents’ arguments. They try to negotiate their new identity, which is predominantly constructed in terms of opposition.

After all, at the end of the episode, South Park’s population reverts to Catholicism. The debate on how big of a role religion should play in the state is abandoned without further discussion as soon as the lives of South Park’s citizens is rebalanced. Their lives have returned to the treasured status quo. Thompson (2007: 24) argues that generally the base for different kinds of conservatives is distinct. On the one hand, he thinks that while economic conservatives may not have a problem with the separation of church and state, religious conservatives may be critical of the effects of economic inequality and the dominant market. Where they agree is the reduction the state’s power and ability to intervene in the affairs of civil society, regardless if this is in terms of the market or school prayer. Judis (2000: 143-144) also names some factors which have altogether contributed to a restored basis for conservatism. The women’s movement, and the continued spread of counterculture have unified conservatives, so have court rulings on school prayer and abortion. The impression that the Church interferes with people’s personal life choices, has polarized masses.

6.1.2. “I have a living thing inside of me that needs to be sucked out, please”

In the US, the debate on abortion has undreamt-of power in political mobilization. For generations, the abortion issue has polarized voters coast to coast. According to Aberbach (2017: 8), abortion politics and the growing relationship of religiosity to conservatism have increased the strength of the conservative movement in the US. Aberbach (2017: 34-39) claims that people who call themselves conservatives are very likely to want restrictions on abortion, or its absolute abolition. Au contraire, the liberal approach is for bodily autonomy. *South Park* satirizes those two clashing positions, subtly breaking taboos along the way.

¹⁴ The First Amendment prohibits the establishment of a state religion.

In season six, episode twelve "A Ladder to Heaven", Cartman accidentally drinks Kenny's ashes, mistaking them for chocolate milk mix, and starts channeling Kenny. After some time of sharing Kenny's memories, Cartman realizes: "I can't live like this. I, I have to find a place where they remove living souls from your body" (S6E12). He therefore visits the Unplanned Parenthood clinic, "a place where they remove living souls from a pregnant woman's body, if you believe fetuses have souls" (S6E12). Cartman speaks to the nurse, who is sitting behind a desk writing absentmindedly.

Cartman: "Looks like I've come to the right place."

Nurse: "Can I help you?"

Cartman: "Yes, hello. I have a living thing inside of me that needs to be sucked out, please" (S6E12).

The introduction to the Unplanned Parenthood clinic reveals the core argument of the abortion debate: whether or not fetuses have souls, respectively if they do, from which date on. The religious belief that God has intended all life of course contradicts pro-choice theories. Abortion proponents have a spectrum of arguments, ultimately authorizing abortions until a certain stage in pregnancy. *South Park's* makers ridicule the latitude which liberals allow for in the abortion debate. In the second episode of season two, Cartman's mother feels she is unfit to raise a child and therefore visits Unplanned Parenthood.

Liane: "I want to have... an abortion."

Receptionist: "Uoh well, we can do that. This must be a very difficult time for you, Mrs..."

Liane: "Cartman. Yes uh- it's such a hard decision, but I just don't feel I can raise a child in this screwy world."

Receptionist: "Yes, Ms. Cartman. If you don't feel fit to raise a child, then abortion probably is the answer. Do you know the actual time of conception?"

Liane: "About eight years ago."

Receptionist: [*Processing*] "...I ssee, so the fetus is..."

Liane: "Eight years old."

Receptionist: "Ms. Cartman, uh- eight years old is a little late to be considering abortion."

Liane: "Really?"

Receptionist: "Yes, this is what we would refer to as the "fortieth trimester"."

Liane: "But I just don't think I'm a fit mother."

Receptionist: "Wuh... But we prefer to abort babies a little- ...earlier on. In fact, there's a law against abortions after the second trimester."

Liane: "Well, I think you need to keep your laws off of my body."

Receptionist: "Hm... Tsk, I'm afraid I can't help you, Ms. Cartman. If you want to change the law, you'll have to speak with your congressman."

Liane: [*Rises from the chair.*] "Well, that's exactly what I intend to do. Good day!" (S2E2).

Ms. Cartman's naivety is priceless. Her surprised exclamation "Really?" has a comical effect and at the same time alludes to the lack of education concerning a tabooed subject like abortion. The fact that the secluded mountain town South Park has its own abortion clinic somehow normalizes its existence. Also, the practice in the abortion clinic's administration makes the matter seem like

day-to-day business. The easiness with which the receptionist calculates the trimester of Liane's "pregnancy" highlights her professionalism. Also, her polite and empathetic approach to Ms. Cartman hints at proper training. *South Park* does not explicitly state the religious arguments which caused the prohibition of such late abortions. To me, it seems that the underlying religious discourse remains unsaid since it is the naturalized discourse. Its absence from the argument emphasizes that there is absolutely no need to argue about its validity. Since the pro-life discourse has originated from the dominant group, the pro-choice argument is branded as the oppositional discourse. When Liane finally declares "keep your laws of my body", she quotes one of the claims frequently made by pro-choice activists.

When Liane finally speaks with the governor, later in the episode, she realizes: "I mean, what right do I have bringing another child into this overpopulated world? Then again, I should've thought of that before having sex. Then again uh- Oh, I just don't know..." (S2E2). The inner conflict she expresses in this scene reflects the struggles of pro-choice advocates all over America. Whereas the divergence between pro-choice and pro-life advocates is clear-cut, the pro-choice fraction internally struggles to justify their positions.

6.1.3. "I'm afraid the government has just put a ban on stem-cell research."

The liberal-conservative divergence spreads into scientific debates. For hardline conservatives it is comparatively easy to maintain whichever argumentation with regard to religious concerns. On the other hand, the liberal side struggles within. In the episode "Kenny Dies", Cartman tries to convince the Congress to lift the ban on embryonic stem cell research. By telling the sad story about his dying friend Kenny, Cartman moves the Congress people to tears (cf. Hanley 2007: 217). In principle, embryonic stem cell research is banned in the US. The question is, even if the embryos are artificially created, whether it is wrong to kill that being (Hanley 2007: 216). Some liberals believe that an embryo hasn't got more moral value than a tadpole (Hanley 2007: 216). Apparently, people with a more conservative mindset believe it is wrong to intervene in nature and to play God.

In episode thirteen of season five, Cartman starts to collect aborted embryos from the Unplanned Parenthood clinic in his backyard with the initial intention of selling them. He is busy making calls and finally finds a research center which promises to pay him an acceptable amount. He delivers the fetuses in a handcart.

Receptionist: "Can I help you?"

Cartman: "Yes, I'm making a delivery of these fetuses hyah?"

Receptionist: "Oh, right, the fetuses. We were very lucky you called. Our last shipment of fetuses was lost in a truck accident."

Cartman: [*rips out a bill...*] "Gee, that's terrible. So, uh who do I talk to about payment?"

Larry (Researcher): [*in the background, walking by*] "This is awful, just awful!"

Receptionist: "Oh Larry! This young man has some new fetuses for research."

Cartman: [*picks up and carries a box*] "You're gonna love these fetuses, Larry. They're top notch."

Larry: "Oh well, I'm sorry, but we can't buy those from you now."

Cartman: "...What?! We made a deal, Larry! I brought them all the way down here already!"

Larry: "I'm afraid the government has just put a ban on stem-cell research."

Receptionist: "A ban? Why?"

Larry: "Too many people were upset about using aborted fetal tissue for a study. It's too bad, too. We really coulda helped a lot of people" (S5E13).

The way Cartman promotes and sells his fetuses comes across as alarmingly professional. He advertises his goods by calling them "top notch". Cartman seems surprised by the ban on stem cell research. This hints at his infantile innocence, besides all the mischief he frequently makes. Apart from the concerns of religiously oriented conservatives, stem cell research is also debatable with regard to ethical standards. Ethical questions that arise are, for instance, when does life begin, and does an unborn being have any rights? The thought of destroying a human fetus is unsettling, even if it would not be capable of survival yet. Cartman's marketing procedure is similarly inhumane and highlights the ethical problematic nature of stem cell research. In fact, there is no federal law that bans human stem cell research altogether, but there are restrictions on use and funding.

After some weeks of lucrative fetus sales, the boys learn that their friend Kenny has a terminal disease. When they visit him in hospital, Cartman promises: "Don't you worry, Kenny. I'm gonna find a cure for you. Everything's gonna be okay!" (S5E13). Cartman later repeats to Kyle: "I'm gonna find a cure, Kyle. I swear to God I'm gonna find a cure." Kyle comforts him: "Sure you will, Cartman. Sure you will" (S5E13). The argument that stem cell research could save other people's lives is the only one that has the potential to knock conservatives off course. Still, it involves delicate consideration to find a position that is personally justifiable. For this reason, embryonic stem cell research is one of the politically polarizing issues where it is more convenient and nerve sparing to go with the established direction of one's generally preferred party. The abundance of ethical and logical considerations connected with stem cell research are overwhelming. In the end of the episode "Kenny Dies", Stan eventually realizes: "This whole time, you were just using Kenny's illness to lift the ban on stem cell research so you could sell your stupid fetuses?" (S5E13).

6.2. "Member when marriage was just between a man and a woman?"

Another issue that polarizes the two opposing political fractions is that of gay rights. The battle is primarily fought over same-sex marriage.¹⁵ Held (2007: 141) is convinced that "[g]ay marriage is an issue that very few people have little or no opinion about". Conservatives, for their part, are likely to have a low tolerance for gay marriage. In the first episode of season twenty, the Member Berries raise the subject of changing social structures. Their nostalgic feeling includes a time "when marriage was just between a man and a woman" (S20E1). *South Park* periodically takes up issues connected with gay rights and homophobia in a conservative society ("Big Gay Al's Big Gay Boat Ride" (S1E4), "Mr. Garrison's Fancy New Vagina" (S9E1), "Trapped in the Closet" (S9E12), "Cartman Sucks" (S11E2), "The F Word" (S13E12)). In the episodes around gay rights, *South Park* reflects the schism in people's thoughts on homosexuality (Hanley 2007: 121). "Follow that Egg!" (S9E10) aired in 2005 satirizes the manifold attempts of argumentation against same-sex marriage. When Mr. Slave breaks the news to the recently sex changed Mrs. Garrison that he plans on getting married, Mrs. Garrison replies unbelievably: "You can't get married, you're faggots!" (S9E10). Mr. Slave's fiancé answers:

Big Gay Al: "Oh that's not true! Colorado is about to pass a bill which allows same-sex marriage." Mr. Slave: "We're getting married right after the bill passes on Saturday." Mrs. Garrison: "Oh, that's just great! They're gonna let queers and homos get married, huh?!" Mr. Slave: "Okay, that's enough. Out, Mr. Garrison." Mrs. Garrison: "We'll just see about this, you fudge-packin' fags!! I'll stop that gay-marriage law!" [*turns and leaves for the front door*] Mr. Slave: "Oh my God, you're just saying that because you're jealous." Mrs. Garrison: [*turns around*] "Jealous of what?! I'm doin' this out of principle! To protect the sanctity of marriage! Fags are gettin' married over MY DEAD BODY!!" (S9E10).

The abusive words "faggot", "fag" and "homo" express the stigmatization of homosexuals. Mrs. Garrison's abusive language is highly hypocritical, because before Mrs. Garrison had the sex change nine episodes earlier, she was a homosexual man herself. Therefore, her argumentation that she is doing it out of principle is somewhat unbelievable. Also, her sudden distancing from homosexuals is deceitful. Mrs. Garrison deserts to homophobia, the shared attitude of a large proportion of the heterosexual population. In general, homophobia is an irrational fear of same-sex identities and practices. Together with a prevalent heteronormativity, this leads to the social exclusion of homosexuals, as reflected in the denial of marriage rights. American conservatives

¹⁵ Brewer and Fettig (2015: 283) observe that the polarization along party lines on the issue of gay rights is stronger within party leadership than among the public. For instance, the public earlier displayed cross-party opinions on the repealing of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy, which banned gay men and women from serving in the military (Brewer & Fettig 2015: 283).

employ a range of argumentation strategies to legitimate homophobia, reference to religion is a popular one.

Mrs. Garrison also attempts to justify her mission with reference to the traditional notion of marriage. Mrs. Garrison protests: "These homosexuals think they can just step all over our traditions! Well I say: Marriage is a holy sacrament between a man and a woman!" (S9E10). Subsuming of individuals under the label "these homosexuals" sets them apart from the speaker's immediate reality. By referring to marriage as a "holy sacrament" Mrs. Garrison ascends the value of this institution. Conservatives' arguments against same-sex marriage are mostly connected to religious morals. However, the justification for the illegitimacy of homosexuality by referring to the direct wording of the bible is problematic. It is an unfruitful endeavor trying to interpret what the Bible wants. Hanley (2007: 124) says that the substantial message of the Bible is, of course, not so clear to figure out. Even though in Leviticus there is mention of man and man relationship, a woman to woman relationship is not mentioned. Hanley (2007: 124) jokingly says, "maybe God also thinks that's kind of hot". Butters has similar thoughts: "Because if I'm bi-curious, and I'm somehow made from God, then I think your God must be a little bi-curious himself!" (S11E2).

In the episode "Cartman Sucks" the tabooing of homosexuality is capitalized (S11E2). Butters is sent to Camp New Grace as a punishment for his bi-curious behavior. The director of Camp New Grace is convinced that God can make the "confused" boys straight again.

"That's right, kids. You see, right now you're like a paper clip. [*pulls one out of his back pocket*] And just like a paper clip, [*begins to mess with it*] God needs to bend you, and shape you, and make youuuu ... straight" (S11E2).

Hanley (2007: 126) brings up a common opinion regarding homosexuality: "there's really no such thing as being *gay* in the first place" [original emphasis]. Some people are strongly convinced that "[s]o-called homosexuality is a "lifestyle choice", although it may be a treatable illness" (Hanley 2007: 126). Furthermore, Hanley (2007: 133) elaborates on the "but it's not natural claim" and says it is extremely arbitrary where to draw the line between what is "natural" and what is not. After all, the metaphor of New Grace's director could not be better chosen. A paper clip which is straightened loses its designated function.

Let me now return to later in the episode "Follow that Egg!". Mrs. Garrison does her utmost to stop the gay marriage law. She tries hard to get other people on board.

Mrs. Garrison: "They passed this law behind our back! We need to tell the governor and the world that gay marriage is not okay! That homosexuals cannot muddy our traditions! And there is only one way for us, all together, to make that message very clear! We need to round up three or four queers and beat the livin' hell out of them!" [*Everyone else falls silent. She steps out from behind the podium and crouches a bit*] "Come on, everybody! Let's get some queers, and some trucks, and have us a good old-fashioned fag drag!"
 Man 2: "Well uh, we were thinkin' we would, you know, just go appeal to the Governor."

Mrs. Garrison: "Appeal to the Governor? Oh, come on! Where's your balls?! Fag drag!"

Man 3: "We don't 'hate' homosexuals, we, we, we just don't want them to be able to marry."

Man 4: "Yeah, we were just thinkin' o' goin' and askin' the Governor to veto the bill."

Man 5: "Yeah."

Mrs. Garrison: [*looking all alone now*] "Eh fah, fag drag?" (S9E10).

As typical for *South Park*'s exaggerated representations, Mrs. Garrisons plans are extremely radical and overshoot. She draws on conservative notions of "traditions", "old-fashioned" and, accordingly, positions herself in the dominant conservative discourse. Although *South Park* commonly accentuates homophobic tendencies in society, these views are mitigated by one of the men saying "we don't 'hate' homosexuals" (S9E10). This conversation highlights that within issue positions, there are still nuances of radicality. Of course, gay marriage appears to many as one of the typical either-or issues. However, ideological grading within opponents and proponents cannot be ignored.

But as with all the other issues, there is no compromise. Alternative solutions to please both sides often appear as ridiculous and eventually do not appease anyone. *South Park* satirizes the ineffectiveness of such middle course solutions:

Governor: "I believe that I might have come up with a compromise to this whole problem that will make everyone happy! People in the gay community want the same rights as married couples, but dissenters don't want the word 'marriage' corrupted. So how about we let gay people get married, but call it something else?" [*everyone listens quietly*] "You homosexuals will have all exactly the same rights as married couples, but instead of referring to you as 'married,' you can be... butt buddies." [*long silence*] "Instead of being 'man and wife,' you'll be... butt buddies. You won't be 'betrothed,' you'll be... butt buddies. Get it? Instead of a 'bride and groom,' you'd be... butt buddies" (S9E10).

Not surprisingly, this suggestion instantly meets with opposition. The attempt at making everyone happy leads to discontent for both sides. This utterance highlights the power of language and how labelling strategies can challenge existing discourse. Held (2007: 153) also discusses the debate of having a different term for gay marriage. Whereas *South Park*'s satirical suggestion "butt buddies" would obviously be derogatory, the US government's case for "civil unions" similarly classifies homosexuals as second-class citizens. The deliberate denial of the same labelling strengthens the underlying homophobic attitudes. Therefore, granting same-sex civil unions is only a minor step into an equitable future.

Lastly, I would like to emphasize particularly in that context that language is a strategy of discriminatory inclusion and exclusion. Language also has the power of propagating ideologies and social hierarchies. I would like to point out that in *South Park* the adjective "gay" is often used as a derogatory term. Especially the boys use it to describe something as stupid. The heading of the next chapter is an example for the boys' usage of the word "gay".

6.3. “What about the war?” – “Ih- ih- ih-it’s gay?”

This chapter attends to warfare as an aspect of foreign policy as represented in *South Park*. Especially the pivotal question whether to wage war or not is a typical either-or issue already commented on in early seasons. The answers to it mutually exclude each other. Episode four of season seven is entirely organized around Americans’ public opinions on warfare. The episode was aired in April 2003. The four boys join in an anti-war protest in order to cut school. As soon as they join the protesters, they are interviewed by a news reporter.

A voice: “Excuse me, boys.” [*the boys look, and the adult is shown*] “Tom Stansel, HBC news. Can you kids tell me why you marched out of school today?” [*behind him is the cameraman and an assistant, and behind her, the news van*]

Stan: [*pause*] “Uh... war?”

Tom: “Right. What about the war?”

Kyle: [*pause*] “Ih ih ih-it’s g-gay?”

Tom: “Uh huh, and what aspect of it do you think is most gay?”

Kyle: [*looks at his sign*] “Uuuh, n-no blood for oil.”

Stan: “Yeah.” [*the mic moves back to him as he looks at his sign*] “War is not my voice.”

Cartman: [*reading Kenny’s sign*] “Bush is a Nazi” (S7E4).

The footing of the scene reminds of a question and answer session in a school class. The boy’s hesitant answers and self-conscious side glances strengthen that sensation. They also employ preformed phrases to justify their, or rather the expected, standpoint. At the same time, it seems that the boys are looking for the one correct answer. As they read from the signs, they comply with the dominant narrative. In the analysis of this scene it is inevitable to consider Cartman’s hilariously incorrect pronunciation of “Nazi”. Although he always acts the part of Hitler’s die-hard fan, he apparently has not understood the coherences yet. After all, the boys seem out of place in the crowd of protesters. However, the four kids function as a miniature model of society anew. Their pretended concern with “uh....war” reflects some people’s hypocrisy on the one hand, and naivety on the other hand. Williams (2017: 64) is certain that there is always a mixture of reasons for joining any kind of mass demonstration. I would like to analyze three mobilizing points in the subchapters below. As *South Park* periodically deals with political standpoints in war-like circumstances, the show targets the implications of oppositional discourses, myth as means to create reality, and the phenomenon of moral panic.

6.3.1. “I’m a little bit Country” – “And I’m a little bit Rock ’n Roll”

As mentioned above, episode four of season seven is entirely themed around confrontational standpoints. *South Park*’s citizens’ pro-war and anti-war stances are constructed in terms of

Country versus Rock 'n Roll music. This clash of genre between Country propaganda songs and Rock 'n Roll protest songs reflects South Park's ideological polarization.

Skeeter: "Well excuse me if..." [*sings*] "*I'm a little bit country.*"

Randy: "*Well I'm a little bit Rock-n-Roll-AH!*"

Skeeter: "*I'm a little for supportin' our troops.*"

Randy: "*And I'm a little for bringin' 'em home.*"

Skeeter: "*I believe freedom isn't free.*"

Randy: "*No, but war shouldn't be our goal.*"

Skeeter: "*We must defend our country.*"

Randy: "*If it means war, then we say NO!*"

Somebody: "Yeehaw!" (S7E4).

Unfortunately, I cannot present the musical effect of this scene in my paper. Still, the struggle of oppositional discourses becomes clear in the lyrics alone. The context of the episode suggests that the conflict revolves around the US's engagement in Iraq. However, the episode more generally contrasts conservative and liberal foreign policy agendas. It is important to note that discourse always exists in networks, they are either supportive or contradictory. Concerning oppositional discourse, the opinions are constructed in terms of binaries. This strategy is typical for populism which pitches one ideology against the other. In South Park, the conflict is also decided between bourgeois and proletariat. What I read out of this scene is the assimilation, the representation of social actors as a group. Concerning the discussion of the Iraq war, different studies have found that these were mostly "polarized into liberal and conservative enclaves rather than people of different political persuasions speaking to each other" (Jenkins et.al. 2012: 48). Jenkins et.al. (2012) devoted their research to online opinion platforms. The findings of Jenkins et.al. (2012: 57) suggest that in the beginning of the discussions on the Iraq war, most of them took place as an interruption in groups which normally discussed other topics.

Looking back even further in time, the Vietnam War and the various reactions to it created a general public distrust of government. South Park takes up this serious issue and satirizes confrontational standpoints. Randy expresses his sorrows in a song.

Randy: [*sings*] "*Why are we fightin' this war?*"

There's a man in the office we didn't vote for.

They didn't give me a choice.

War is not my voice! Yeaahhhhhh!" (S7E4).

South Park's anti-war protesters distance themselves from their government's actions. Their catchy mantra "War is not my voice" echoes after Randy's song. One element of this text that catches the audience's eye is rhyme. This deliberate consonance of words strengthens the underlying argument. Another strengthening strategy is the establishment of an inclusive community. Randy's first two lines feature the generic references to anti-war protesters as we.

This framing shifts to the singular in the last two lines. This shift personalizes the argument and attaches an emotional dimension to it. When expanding the view to the wider socio-political context, it becomes obvious how *South Park* reflects contemporary discourse again. South Park lacks an intermediary in this regard, just as American politics did in 2003. The Vietnam war and ensuing partially irrational backlash led to a skepticism of government. This distrust of government is usually a conservative trademark (Aberbach 2017: 8). Yet, in combination with the claim for individual sovereignty, distrust of government can infuse liberal thinkers too. With regard to this fraternizing skepticism Williams (2013: 64) claims that the “not in my name” slogan got stuck in the political consciousness.¹⁶ To Williams, the slogan expresses an individual’s withdrawal from the actions of government. According to Williams (2013: 71), the “not in my name” argument questions the link between the liberal sovereignty of the individual and the sovereignty of the state. Williams (2013: 64) argues that the slogan expresses a desire to dissociate from the war. However, it expresses a decisively different reasoning from traditional pacifists’ rejection of war in general. Instead, “not in my name” questions the authority of state government to wage an explicit war. Moreover, the claim of “not in my name” has a more complex, and more powerful logic. It questions an authority’s claims for the need to protect a state and its citizens (Williams 2013: 68).

Regarding confrontational standpoints, I would like to mention two types of discourse connected with the orientation towards warfare. On the one hand Jenkins et. al. (2012: 50) name “prudential discourse” egocentric and addressing the self-interest of an actor, which can be an entire nation. Prudential discourse is formulated in terms of benefits and costs and it is therefore instrumental. On the other hand, there is normative discourse which rests on moral evaluations (Jenkins et.al. 2012: 53-54). For instance, the argument that “Saddam was evil, crazy, or demonic” (Jenkins et.al. 2012: 54) is a value-laden judgment and typical of the tendency to morally demonize an enemy.

6.3.2. “Member no ISIS?”

The demonization of the enemy has always played a role in warfare, but even more so in today’s War on Terror where the enemy is mostly invisible. According to Esch (2010: 365) the War on Terror is “the largest and furthest-reaching counter-terrorist campaign in history, and it has come to define the domestic and international political environment. It extends into multiple dimensions”. The re-emergence of foreign threats with radical Islam and the 9/11 events, has given conservatives a new *raison d’être*. For many, the war on terror is the functional equivalent to the Cold War on Communism (Nash 2009: 332). However, Esch (2010: 365) claims that not the

¹⁶ Williams quotes that slogan from a London protest during a mass demonstration in February 2003.

terrorist attacks triggered a change of global dimensions. It was the United States' response and the public readiness for that response that changed the global landscape. The United States' response was not an inevitable consequence of 9/11. It was rather produced through a shared, mythologized understanding of the significance of the attacks. Esch (2010: 365) states that "[f]ollowing 9/11, the myths of American Exceptionalism and Barbarism vs. Civilization and their variations have been reappropriated to make significance of the 9/11 narrative and the threat of "new" terrorism. These two myths have helped to define American national identity and have been prominent elements of war discourse throughout the country's history." Esch (2010: 357-358) makes clear that political myth operates within all political cultures, regardless of how "demythologized" or "enlightened" a group might view itself. A reason for this is that myth responds to chaos and insignificance in the world by offering certain significance. In addition, it is its invisibility, its ubiquity, and its "powerful grip on our psyches" that allow myth to circumvent all critical inspection (Esch 2010: 360). In season twenty, *South Park*'s citizens and *South Park*'s prominent politicians fall prey to the temptation of myth.

Member Berries: "Member feeling safe? 'Member no ISIS? 'Member Reagan? Ohh, I 'member. Ooo, 'member? Ooo, 'member?" [*Randy sits up and spits out what's left of the berries he's eaten*]

Randy: "What the fuck's going on with these member berries?" (S20E1).

South Park's Member Berries contribute to season twenty's revival of past values and mythicized memories. The Member Berries' repeated question for 'membrance and their spark of nostalgic feelings make them advocates of myth. Their soft tone of voice, their high-pitched voices in general, lend innocence and calmness to their statements. Yet, on the lexical level they convey sometimes politically questionable messages. Myth constructs shared understandings through language. The repetition and propagation of mythologized messages turns them into a part of reality and contributes to shaping the cultural narrative. Esch (2010: 363) points out that "political myth has an exceptional ability to give power to language." Randy's response, employing an expression of powerful language, places 'power of language' on a figurative level. Even though he seems to have noticed that something is wrong with the Member Berries, he is still unable to identify the problem, as underlined using a question.

Myths grant certain social cues for the interpretation of problems. Myths relate them to ourselves. Esch (2010: 361) argues that while they "may or may not propose a solution, they frame problems in a way that validates certain courses of action while precluding others". She continues that wars cannot be fought without a "widespread willingness in society". Such a willingness demands a communal understanding of the social circumstances and significance of an event (Esch 2010: 363). The War on Terror is just one of many examples where myth contributed to shaping

oppositional discourse. Myth has the power to sway opinion, as it offers justification and significance to controversial issues. Hetherington and Suhay (2011: 546) are astonished at how widespread the support for War on Terror was following the 9/11 attacks. Some of the measures supported as a response to the attacks are considered to contradict longstanding American ideals.

6.3.3. "We're all gonna die!"

As Esch (2010: 361) fittingly puts it: myths help us cope with "scary problems". However, this type of problem is often socially or politically constructed itself. This chapter deals with the concept of moral panic and the politics of fear. Moral panic is a term coined by Cohen in 1973 and describes a situation in which one group tries to exert collective moral control over another group. Usually, moral panic begins with a threat to the community. Following such a threat, public concern builds up, and along with concern also hostility (Cohen 1973).

South Park is often the showplace for irrational hostility and excessive concerns. Especially with regard to polarizing issues, emotions often win over rationality. The war versus peace question is not a rational one anymore but increasingly involves emotions, insults and humiliation, even crossing oceans. In season twenty-one, the President, Mr. Garrison tweeted: "North Korea doesn't have the balls to attack Tweek. They have little tiny rice balls" (S21E2). This attack is an example for low-level political rhetoric. In episode two of season twenty-one the abstruse reality has caught up on *South Park*'s satire.

Tweek is the first to bring contemporary foreign policy issues into the spotlight, literally. He presents a self-written song in front of a large school audience.

PC Principal: [*taps the mic six times*] "All right everyone, listen up. Today we're gonna have a performance by one of our students who has written a song. The song is about his feelings towards the current political climate with North Korea. Put your hands together for Tweek." [*the kids applaud, PC Principal exits stage left, and Tweek approaches the piano from stage right with some sheet music. He sets up the music and gets ready to play. He plays some angry, jarring notes on the piano as he screams*]

Tweek: "We're all gonna die! They have nuclear missiles! Wuh! Waaaa! Why are you just sitting there, doing nothing?!" [*stops playing and faces the audience*] "We have to get out of here! North Korea wants to kill us all and our President keeps making it worse!" [*walks to the front of the stage*] "Why are you just sitting there?!" [*returns to the piano and resumes playing*] "Why are you all acting like nothing's wrooong?! North Korea is going to bomb us! We are all dead!" [*Stan and Kyle glance at each other*] "We have to do something! Do something! Do something!" [*screams, leaves the piano, and exits stage right*] (S21E2).

Questions and imperatives alternate in Tweek's song. His "why" questions sound like accusations. He accuses the passivity and blindness of his fellow students and even more so the adults in the audience. Yet, the main argument of this scene is the recontextualization of the North Korea

conflict to affecting Tweek's personal sphere. The focus narrows down to one particular boy's life. This gives depth to the argument and brings the conflict closer to people's immediate realities. Tweek's song could also be interpreted with regard to the often-claimed pessimistic future outlook of conservatives. Regarding the concept of moral panic, Tweek's song functions as an intensifier for the socio-politically constructed narrative of threat. During threatening times, according to Hetherington and Suhay's (2011: 557) research, many people adopt "antidemocratic and hawkish preferences". As soon as people perceive severe threats to their safety, most are more responsive to "authoritarian thinking". Hetherington and Suhay (2011: 556) provide strong evidence that perceptions of threat cause people to embrace more "authoritarian" policy standpoints. On top of that, Hetherington and Suhay's findings indicate even greater danger to democracy. They ascertain that when ordinary people feel a serious threat to their safety, they are more likely to embrace antidemocratic preferences regardless of their regular political preference. Under the right circumstances, antidemocratic preferences can quickly become popular, main stream positions, in Hetherington & Suhay's understanding. To a certain degree, this has been the American experience following 9/11. Hetherington and Suhay (2011: 557) name some of these questionable practices that enjoyed majority support as a reaction to 9/11: support for preemptive war, torture, wiretapping without warrant, etc.

The media also plays a part in hyping up threats to society. By means of tabloidization, the media increasingly presents news in a more emotive and personalized way, in a simplistic and populist format.

Anchor 1: "A young homosexual boy known only as Tweek has touched the hearts of many by sending cupcakes to the North Korean government". [*a shot of Tweek trembling*] "The little rascal apparently made a dent with the North Korean dictator, who is said to have loved the cupcakes so much that he started to make his own." [*A shot of Kim Jong-un watching the cupcake dough stream out of a machine*] (S21E2).

The news coverage on Tweek's act of kindness highlights his good intentions. The implementation of positively connoted words like "hearts", "little rascal", "loved" appeal to the audience's emotions and evoke equally positive mental pictures. In contrast to these emotional representations there's the president's tweets that interpret Tweek's actions to the contrary.

News anchor: "The President of the United States just tweeted again, this time saying "I hope ALL children of America will stand with Tweek in saying 'GO AHEAD AND BOMB US, KIM JONG DONG, WE FUCKING DARE YOU!'" (S21E2).

These tweets are characterized by crude and abusive language. Mr. Garrison's resorts to an informal register including swearwords. The epithet he gives North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un is degrading and implies disrespect for the foreign culture. The president's tweet reflects the partially rough tone of American and global politics. Moreover, it represents internet platforms as

new arenas for warfare. The president’s tweets, another metatextual reference to the American president in office, are a major motif in *South Park*’s newer episodes. Both, in *South Park* and the US alike, these outlets of rage contribute to the occurrence and propagation of moral panic. With an eye to the media’s role, Hetherington and Suhay conclude:

“While catastrophic events understandably cause fear, a media culture that is biased toward sensational coverage of terror-related events, not to mention politicians who realize that they can benefit by exaggerating threats, serves to exacerbate and prolong the public's fears and, thus, put further pressure on democratic norms” (Hetherington & Suhay 2011: 557-558).

The awareness of threats and accordingly the media’s endeavor to trade upon these threats make a society feel constantly at war. In times of perceived threats, policy preferences shift decisively. This can not only be observed with regard to warfare but also concerning other policy issues. The next chapter deals with *South Park*’s representation of the anti-immigration discourse. I would like to lead over into this chapter with another quote from “I’m a little bit Country” (S7E4). Skeeter addresses the liberal anti-war protesters: “Hey all you un-American bastards! If you don’t like America, why don’t you git out?” (S7E4).

6.4. “Member when there weren’t so many Mexicans?”

The discourse on immigration is one more example of polarizing issue positions. Some people want others to “get out” of their country regardless of the reasons for their immigration. At present, conservatives hold a rather radical anti-immigration position. Especially illegal or undocumented immigration has been the conservatives’ *bête noire* for decades (cf. Aberbach 2017: 69). However, to date, some presidential candidates were reluctant concerning their policy on the immigration issue as they feared to otherwise lose votes from the Latino community. In the first episode of season twenty-one, the Member Berries encapsulate the conservative concern: “‘Member when there weren't so many Mexicans? Oh, I'member” (S21E1). I break down the issue into three central concerns: the dissociation from the “other”, stereotypical representation of ethnic minorities, and xenophobic attitudes in conservative backlash politics.

6.4.1. “We should have put up a goddamned wall”

The immigration issue is one that is primarily viewed from the conservative standpoint in *South Park*. The absence of an oppositional discourse hints at *South Park*’s secluded community where similar attitudes circulate. A core concern in *South Park*’s secluded and homogenous community is the dissociation from strangers and foreigners.¹⁷ Apart from the barriers built by language

¹⁷ See CHAPTER III, page 10, 14.

through referential strategies, physical barriers are brought up for discussion too. In July 2002, *South Park*’s episode “Child Obduction Isn’t Funny” capitalizes on the idea of building a wall to keep outsiders out. Meanwhile, reality has caught up on satire once again. In September 2015, *South Park* takes up the topic once again. After several Canadians have settled down in South Park, Mr. Garrison is convinced: “We should have put up a goddamned wall” (S19E2). Mr. Garrison complains:

Mr. Garrison: [*hushed*] “It’s like nobody cares! And they just keep comin’. Crossin’ the border with their dirty families, playin’ their stupid music!” [*looks to his left*] “I mean, look at ‘em! I’ll bet not ONE of them is here legally!” [a group of Canadians is playing pool] (S19E2).

Mr. Garrison vents his growing anger about the situation in South Park. By referring to the immigrants solely using “they”, he constructs a definite outgroup and distance to the “we”. The adjectives employed to describe their practices, “dirty” and “stupid”, carry negative connotations. Mr. Garrison’s word choice reflects a condescending perspective on the immigrants. The phrase “crossin’ the border” creates an immediacy of the event, as if the border was precariously close. With this expression, *South Park* mirrors a reality for residents in the South of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California. Yet, *South Park* inverts the socio-political discourse of a more xenophobic South. Instead of the Mexicans crossing the border in the South of the US, *South Park* features Canadians invading the country’s North. Kirk (1986: 154) argues that political conservatism especially grew on Southern soil, with regard to the context of the abolition of slavery. The population there felt they had to share their land with “another race”. This incited anxiety in the population. Also, an abolition of slavery would mean a totally new life situation for everyone. This is what Southerners were afraid of (Kirk 1986: 154). Conservatism is still particularly vivid in the South where there is a more direct involvement with immigration and its aftermaths. That is due to the fact that the US still only borders on other nations in its very North and South. *South Park* sets up a ridiculous reversal of reality, confronting the North with immediate immigration.

Another instance where *South Park* is confronted with an unanticipated immigration wave is in season eight. When a time border suddenly opens up in South Park’s vicinity, the uncontrolled immigration spurs a mass protest at the time border. Randy is interviewed for TV:

Randy: “If our government is just gonna let anybody into our time who wants to come, then we have to take matters into our own hands.” [*another camera view shows Stan next to his father. Stan tries to block out this interview with eyes shut tight and his fingers on his nose*] [...] “Present-day America Number One!” (S8E7).

Randy’s word choice classes his talk with other protest speeches. The figurative idiom “take matters into our own hands” emphasizes the speaker’s dynamism. Stan’s nonverbal backchannels, however, express the senselessness of the adults’ protest. Stan’s facial expressions and gestures

intensify his aversion for his dad’s cause. Indeed, the form of South Park’s males’ protest is in itself quite questionable. In order to stop the future from happening, all men undress and start making out with each other (see S8E7). Despite its dubiousness, the participants are all completely confident of their plan’s ingenuity. Randy brings the message home shouting “Present-day America Number One!” (S8E7). This exclamation is a manifestation of prejudice discourse, which discriminates against one group, in articulate favor of the other. The above representation depicts the tunnel vision of ideologues immersed in their own cause. When people only see and know one perspective on a problem, they become blind for other possible approaches.

6.4.2. “Syrian refugees are all terrorists!”

The gradual naturalization of prejudice discourse results in stereotypical and generalizing representations of the discriminated group. *South Park* often addresses such stereotypical representations. While the show without doubt circulates such “stereotypes”, it also questions the governing mechanisms which normalize the practice. The “stereotypical” representations accumulate especially with regard to the immigration issue. When dealing with the foreign it is common practice to subsume the people under a few prominent and exaggerated characteristics. In season nineteen, the two presidential candidates discuss immigration:

Announcer: “We now return live to the 2015 Presidential Debate.”

Moderator: “Our next question is for you, Mrs. Clinton. Many voters believe that Syrian refugees should not be allowed into our country for security reasons. What do you think?”

Hillary: “Keeping our country safe has become more and more difficult, but I believe there are several things that we can -”

Garrison: “No! You shut the hell up! You’ve got a dumpy butt, and seven chins. Syrian refugees are all terrorists!” (S19E8).

The discrepancy of formality between the two speakers is noteworthy. Especially concerning syntax, Mrs. Clinton’s diction stands out against Mr. Garrison’s way of speaking. He applies primarily monosyllabic words and does not stint on insults either. Mr. Garrison’s insults have no relevant connection to the previous turn; therefore, the maxim of relevance is flouted. In addition, his claim that “Syrian refugees are all terrorists” is a generalization typical for racist discourse. An entire group of people is reduced to one common characteristic. Racist discourse is traversed by such fallacies. This reduction is strengthened by stereotypes, which exaggerate the traits and further solidify differences. Mr. Garrison appears to use his arguments in order to justify and legitimize the exclusion and discrimination of another group. In general, successful argumentation always relies on the persuasive power of certain linguistic techniques to influence a person’s beliefs, desires or fears. The word ‘terrorist’ is one that immediately triggers a mental image with

everyone. Therefore, it is particularly useful in fueling fears. Darryl also observes the threat that different minority groups bring into South Park.

Darryl: "This whole country's goin' to shit! Muslims tryin' to kill us, black people riotin', and Mexicans poppin' out babies! Pretty clear it's either them or us, so I say kill 'em all!" [turns and walks out the doors] (S21E1).

Darryl's conclusion is very extreme and comes surprisingly. Even though the character is known as being an easily enraged "white conservative", the sudden decision to "kill 'em all" is still startling. Since he walks out the door at the end of his turn, his words appear definite. His exit functions like a physical full stop. Another noteworthy feature is the assimilation in Darryl's speech, the way he consistently represents social actors as a group. At the same time, a categorization takes place where functionalization (what people do) and identification (what people are) interlock. The topos "it's either them or us" maintains the argument that immigration endangers current living standards. Without having to constitute the argument anew, a topos automatically invokes the conclusion and justifies discriminatory practices towards certain people/groups. While racism becomes acceptable in society, it doesn't spare political elites. *South Park* illustrates this issue in its derivative presidential debates.

Anchor Bill Keegan: "Some concern over the President's competency again today. It was during a Middle East peace conference when the President referred to the people of Saudi Arabia as a bunch of "dirty sand Niggers". Though the comments seem divisive, Speaker of the House, Paul Ryan, says he's sticking by his President 100%" (S21E7).

On the one hand, the invasion of degrading language into political elites has led to its legitimization, according to the values of society. The naturalization of racist discourse, on the other hand, is used to sustain the unequal power relations. The negative stereotyping is a form of oppression and seeks to maintain oppressive practices.

6.4.3. "Are the Mexicans actually staying?"

The wish to maintain oppressive practices is deduced from xenophobia. Xenophobia is a fear of the foreign which shapes South Park's society. Particularly Cartman has an entrenched heterophobia which fuels his irrational dislike of different groups. Cartman's question "Are the Mexicans actually staying?" (S19E3) comes at the wrong moment, at the end of South Park's new image commercial. Kyle immediately hushes Cartman. In the immediate co-text of Cartman's utterance, South Park seeks to prove its newly gained cosmopolitanism. Cartman annihilates this endeavor. His rigged question contains the presupposition that the Mexicans have not been supposed to stay in the first place. The modifying adverb 'actually' intensifies the impression of Cartman's skepticism. He expresses his fear that the settlement of a new family could change the

South Park he used to know. The fear of the foreign is often linked with pessimistic visions of the future.

This pessimistic outlook is the central topic in South Park's episode "Goobacks" aired in 2004 (S8E7). The newsman Chris Holt talks about the immigrants from the future:

"Yes, there are incredible things we're learning about Americans in the future, Aaron. I- it appears that in the future, Americans have evolved into a hairless uniform mix of all races. They are all one color, which is a yellowy light-brownish whitish color. Uh, it seems race is no longer an issue in the future, because all ethnicities have mixed into one. Perhaps most interesting is how this has affected their language. The people in the future speak a complete mix of English, Chinese, Turkish and, indeed, all world languages, which sounds something like this:" [*makes three guttural sounds*] "Back to you, Aaron" (S8E7).

What can be noticed in the newsman's speech is audience design, i.e. the way in which the speaker changes styles in response to their audience. The speaker acknowledges the presence of an audience and therefore adapts his lexical choices. The expression "Americans" suggests a collectivized identity. The report contains persuasive strategies, such as "incredible things", most interesting", which steer the audience towards a positive reaction. The speaker seeks to convince the audience and therefore omits negatively connoted wording. From a more distanced perspective, the newsman reflects a distorted a surreal concept of the future. The people's original fears are exceeded in a hyperbolic manner. All these xenophobic fears bolster conservative backlash politics. *South Park* demonstrates that conservative backlash politics appeal particularly to white males as they see their social status threatened by changing racial hierarchies as well as feminism and gay right movements. Obama's first presidency in 2008 reawoke conservative feelings within the American nation. There were many white people in the country who felt that they were losing everything they know, that the country their forefathers built has somewhat been stolen from them. *South Park* satirizes and preys on these conservative sentiments. However, ideology still constructs reality and blurs the vision for detecting naturalized prejudice discourse.

6.5. "They took our jobs!"

In *South Park*, the discourse of unemployment is closely linked with immigration naysaying as well as economic developments and modernization. The show's representation accurately reflects the discursive reality of the US and the clashing issue positions.

6.5.1. "And now I'm fired! That's the cold, hard truth of immigration!"

For generations, immigration has been made the scapegoat for several shortcomings in American society, unemployment only being one of many. Mr. Garrison's words "That's the cold, hard truth

of immigration!" (S19E2) highlight this long-established accusatory tendency. His claim that this would be the truth, disallows alternatives to the dominant narrative.

The seventh episode of season eight, aired on April 28, 2004, takes an intriguing twist on the direct effects of immigration. The episode revolves around people from the future arriving in South Park, seeking employment. Of course, the boys also learn the "truth" of immigration the hard way:

Stan: "Hello, Mrs. Landis. Would you like snow-shoveling service again today?"

Mrs. Landis: "Ooh, oh dear, I'm sorry boys, but I've already hired someone else to do it."

Cartman: "What?! Who?!"

Mrs. Landis: "One of those immigrants from the future. He said he would do it for twenty-five cents."

Kyle: "Twenty-five cents? Well that's not even worth it."

Stan: "All right guys, come on. Let's go to the next house." [*the boys turn to go back to the sidewalk...*]

Kyle: "Dude." [*the camera pulls back to show the immigrants shoveling snow off sidewalks and driveways up and down the street*]

Stan: "Son of a bitch!" (S8E7).

On the level of description, the boys appear to be surprised by the new reality. Cartman's seemingly puzzled exclamations hint at the boys' initial disbelief. But then, the pull focus in this scene reveals the snow shoveling immigrants. This suitable change of camera focus highlights the change in the story and simultaneously in the lives of South Park's kids. Stan's cuss closing the scene suggests growing rage among the boys.

The features identified above are used to create an antagonistic narrative of the effects of immigration. The scene alludes to the topos that the sole purpose of the immigrants is to make the life of South Park's citizens worse. In addition, the experience of the boys makes them part of an imagined community, bound together by shared knowledge. Stan becomes an active part of this community when he attends one of the rednecks¹⁸ meetings. The men are vigorously discussing the issue of unemployment when Stan pipes up:

Stan: "It's affecting kids too! Me and my friends started our own snow-shoveling business. We were trying to be responsible and make money, you know? But then the people came along and, and now we're out of work too!" [*silence*] "Oh, they took our jobs!"

Other Men: [*at random times*] "They took yer jobs!" (S8E7).

Stan identifies himself as a member of the imagined community by repeating their connecting mantra: "They took our jobs". The repetition of the phrase "they took our jobs", including dialectal induced variations, leads to an enforcement of the intended message. South Park's townspeople blame their loss of employment on the immigrants from the future. They feel the need to remind

¹⁸ "Redneck" is the label used in the show to describe South Park's working-class males. In this paper, I will also apply this term to refer to this group of people.

the audience of that perceived reality. In addition, the visual representation of "Goobacks" shoveling snow proves the validity of their allegations to the audience. The reason for this representation is the legitimization for the rednecks' protesting actions. The visual depiction of the immigrants contributes to justifying the argument. The notion that even children are affected highlights the sentiment of the undeserved poor versus the "deserved" poor, a frequently applied labelling by Republicans. Unemployment could affect anybody.

At the same time, Randy seeks to provide another perspective on that one-sided narrative. Randy, a habitually ideologically extreme character of the show, functions as the voice of reason in the expanding anti-immigrant discourse. Randy tries to explain to his son Stan why the people from the future come to South Park:

Randy: "Hey, Stanley, you need to understand something: Those people from the future have had a hard life! Where they come from is dirty and overpopulated and poor! You can't even imagine the kind of depression they come from! So, for us, who have everything sooo good, to judge them, is wrong! Do you understand?! Next time you think about calling them goobacks, you might just wanna stop for a second and think about how crappy the future really is!" (S8E7).

The modality in "*need to understand*" and "*might just wanna stop*" emphasizes Randy's superior position to his son. Randy uses this authority to impose his issue position on Stan. In Randy's utterance "You can't even imagine [...]" his moralizing and patronizing voice seeps out. The use of the negative adjectives "dirty", "poor", "hard" is part of an intensifying strategy to strengthen Randy's argument. He uses words that carry emotional and evaluative load. Consequently, the language applied is meant to challenge Stan's and the rednecks' ideology. Apart from that, Randy's speech act must be regarded as embedded in the overarching context of political correctness. Randy himself is absolutely convinced by his viewpoint. His claim for truth, not accepting any alternatives on his part, underscores the relativism of the discourse on unemployment. There are struggling positions involved, both warranted in some respects. Truth is not absolute. The observation by an aging hippie liberal douche leads over to the next issue. "Heh, it's typical for conservative rednecks like these to view the immigrants as the problem, heh, but really, the problem is America" (S8E7).

6.5.2. "So it appears the government ain't gonna help us!"

The second aspect which shapes the discourse on unemployment is the role which the American government should play in economic developments. The size of government agency has long been a dividing issue for the two opposing political camps. According to Stonecash (2015: 70), changing social conditions have prompted fundamental disagreements about what, and especially how much, government should do. The discourse on unemployment is strikingly polarized in American

politics and society at large. Again, the two political extreme positions diverge wildly on their approaches to tackling unemployment. Their different strategies, however, seem to have the same aim: reducing unemployment. On the one hand, American Democrats take up the cause of creating an economy that “should strengthen our country and work for every American, not just those at the top” (Democratic Party Platform 2018). Democrats are eager to emphasize that “[d]espite Republican obstruction at almost every turn”, they claim to have provided relief for hardworking Americans who lost their jobs through no fault of their own (Democratic Party Platform 2018). On the other hand, Republicans advocate less to no government involvement in the unemployment issue:

“The largest fundamental belief of the Republican party when it comes to jobs is that less governmental regulation will help foster lower unemployment rates. The government needs to stop interfering and instead give the public the resources it needs to feed its own economy and therefore create more jobs” (Republican Views 2015).

Anew, it becomes visible in what ways the polarized political debate soaks into *South Park*’s fictional realm. For conservatives, the ideal world is market driven, where individuals take responsibility for themselves and for their families. Government should not provide affirmative action, health-insurance plans or other federal benefits (cf. Aberbach 2017: 42). Becker (2008: 156) identifies *South Park*’s ethos as being relatively anti-government. Becker claims that the show upholds the stance that government should not promote economic equality.

Therefore, it is startling that the rednecks turn to Congress with their unemployment problem. Ultimately though, they are unsatisfied with the response they receive:

Darryl: “Listen up, everybody! We’ve just received a reply from our congressman. [*unfurls a letter*] ““Dear intolerant rednecks, we sympathize with you all losing your jobs. However, we feel your solution of shooting everyone who crosses the time border is inhumane”” (S8E7).

The radical idea of the rednecks to solve the immigration issue was rejected. The juxtaposition of the addressing attributes “dear” and “intolerant” is noteworthy. This textual dichotomy carries judgmental load. The genericization of the “rednecks” as a social class rather than as individuals symbolically removes the people affected from immediate life experience. Darryl’s utterance features a scare quote which indicates a voice other than his, embedded in his turn. Darryl, as the leader of the unemployed rednecks, observes at the end of reading the letter to his compatriots: “So it appears the government ain’t gonna help us! Which means we gotta take matters into our own hands!” (S8E7).

The idiom of “taking matters into one’s own hands” has a strong determinative connotation. The set phrase carries the notion of an ultimatum, a final resolution. Darryl’s words reflect the ultimate frustration of the rednecks. They appear to be disappointed by the government with good

reason. However, expanded to the wider sociopolitical context, their reaction seems somewhat paradox. First of all, it is the American conservatives who want a smaller and less intrusive government (Aberbach 2017: 41). Secondly, it is perplexing, for the same reasons, that the losers of contemporary economic developments, members of the “working class”, are drawn towards conservative ideologies. According to Weinberg (1993), the beneficiaries of recent economic trends would be those providing “symbolicanalytic services”, i.e. jobs that involve the manipulation of information and require higher education. On the other hand, the “losers” of the developments are people working in “routine production services”, i.e. people engaged in farming, manufacturing. Another group of losers are the ones providing “routine personal services”, such as truck drivers, custodians, restaurant employees, barbers, etc. These individuals, who make their living by performing routine production or service jobs and who lack postsecondary education, have been hard hit by the changing American economy. It appears not to be mere incident that the radical right groups have drawn their sympathizers from whites employed in these increasingly distressed economic sectors (cf. Weinberg 1993: 202). Randy has an interesting observation ready: “God, why do the economically challenged always have to screw up everything?!” (S19E3). There is no straightforward answer to Randy’s rhetorical question. Still, the worries of the “economically challenged” can no longer be ignored if political polarization should be called to a halt someday.

6.5.3. “You! Will not! Replace us!”

As a third factor, modernization is held accountable for the loss of workplaces. Technological progress and pioneering, and future-oriented electronics are frequently blamed for the undesirable development towards automation of services. As Huntington (1957: 460) points out, conservatism is, generally, not just the absence of change but “the articulate, systematic, theoretical resistance to change.” Darryl and his followers repeatedly confirm this substantial claim. The issue of South Park’s rednecks losing their jobs has been the centerpiece of many *South Park* episodes before. Hence, it is surprising that in a politically increasingly polarized climate, the first episode of season twenty-one, aired in fall 2017, draws on the unemployment issue again, instead of capitalizing on the dominant narrative of unfit political leadership. Altogether, the episode “White People Renovating Houses” is an enormously humorous speculum for the contemporary American media landscape. Yet, the most outstanding element of this episode is the rendering of Amazon’s Alexa shamelessly stealing jobs. *South Park*’s sublime satirical take on post-industrial modernization accentuates another major concern of conservatives: modern developments threatening the workplaces of honest, hard-working Americans.

Darryl: "Look at 'em. Every day, people are buyin' more an' more of them Amazon and Google thingies while we all sit here an' [*pounds on the bar counter with his left fist*] lose our jobs!"

Eddie: "It ain't right."

Darryl: "Automated personal assistants, self-drivin' trucks, whatever happened to people jobs?!"

Cleetus: "They took our jobs!" [*the other rednecks join him in protest*]

Darryl: [*stands on a table*] "They took our jubs! And it's time for us to band together and take to the streets to say "We ain't gonna take it no more!" "*[the other rednecks resume the protest and a couple of Confederate flags pop up and are swung side to side]*" "Now let's get out there and protest that Alexa took our jobs!" (S21E1).

Darryl and his compatriots are outraged by the current economic developments that threatens their entrenched existence. The "they took our jobs" parallelism is a cross-reference to the episode "Goobacks" (S8E7), aired thirteen years earlier. This is a significant connection. What differentiates the discourse of unemployment in season twenty-one from that in season eight is the culprit:

Darryl: "Amazon!"

Protesters: "You took our jobs!"

Darryl: "Google! Apple!"

Protesters: "Took our jobs!" (S21E1).

The redneck's protest-chant utilizes rhythm and repetition to enforce the underlying argument. The prosodic features of their vocal protest intensify their oppositional standpoint. The repetition of the lexical bundle "took our jobs" contributes to strengthening the relevance of the redneck's issue position. Another lexical bundle that is repeated is "you will not replace us".

Protesters: "You! Will not! Replace us! You! Will not! Replace us!"

Randy: [*walks towards the window*] "Oh, Goddammit!"

Protesters: "You! Will not! Replace us!"

Protester 2: "Yeeeeeah! Suck it, Alexa!"

Protester 3: "Eat shit, Siri!"

Protesters: "You! Will not! Replace us!" (S21E1).

The protesters clearly divide the "you" and the "us" in their chant. This referential strategy and the construction of the outgroup strengthen the protesters' internal sense of community. Their identity as a group is constructed by opposition to and marked by difference from the imagined outgroup. In sum, the "you will not replace us" issue leads over to another entrenched conservative concern – the fear of being replaced in society. The constructed outgroup, whoever it includes, threatens to replace the established ingroup.

CHAPTER VII: "I just can't keep up with this town no more."

The change in social hierarchies evokes the fear of replacement. South Park steadily serves as an arena for nation- and worldwide changes in social hierarchies. As outlined above, there are innumerable issues which add momentum to the transformation of society as we know it, and as conservatives love it. This chapter rounds up the discussions of the previous chapters. The issues of a changing world order will be reframed facing the discursive reality of the American people.

7.1. "Have you noticed... changes... lately?"

The threat becomes real. Not only in South Park, but all over America, the established social order is about to collapse. Three major factors particularly worry white working-class males, who have been identified as the base of the conservative electorate. One of them is related to the issue of unemployment as outlined above.

When the existence of many South Park working men is suddenly threatened, Darryl points out: "I work with a lot of fine men who have families to feed" (S8E7). His statement naturalizes the connection between men and their naturalized "obligation" to feed a family. Men are the providers, that's what Darryl's statement makes clear. Their status is, however, increasingly threatened by the relentless modernization of economy. What plays into the problematic nature of the rednecks' imminent unemployment is the prevailing hegemonic notion of the masculine as the provider. Conservatives naturally value the traditional understandings of masculinity and patriarchy. That is why the loss of the ability to provide for the family would strip them off their traditional function.

However, not only the decline of patriarchy is a worrisome issue for conservatives. There are other processes that threaten the status quo. All those concerns feed into one overarching narrative: what was once theirs now belongs to someone else. It seems like as if America had new owners. According to Weinberg (1993: 193), the sense of loss and dispossession is palpable to conservatives in a threefold manner. Firstly, they are males at a time where women have gained substantial powers in public life. Secondly, they are whites in areas where the African American, Hispanic and Asian population is growing. Thirdly, they are Protestants in a period when Catholics and Jews have risen to positions of prestige (Weinberg 1993: 193).

In addition, all the issue positions discussed in chapter six lead conservatives to fear for their status. They seek to maintain the naturalized order, i.e. traditional religious values instead of individual liberties, marriage between men and women only, a country that appears strong to the outside, and jobs that maintain the masculine as primary provider. In the face of threats to this order, it is sometimes hard to believe that all those changes should occur coincidentally.

In season nineteen, *South Park* is deeply immersed in the PC debate. As the content of *South Park* becomes more serious, the topical coherence of the show also develops. In the aftermath of dangerous events at school, an agent interviews the town's police officer Mr. Barbrady:

Agent: "You've been in this town longer than almost anyone. Have you noticed... changes... lately?"

Barbrady: "Yeah, a lot of changes."

Agent: "They aren't a coincidence, officer. They are all part of a plan to take down your beloved town and everyone in it" (S19E7).

The question of the agent comes somewhat unprecedented. His rhetoric is nebulous. "Take down" connotes with a violent action and accentuates the gravity of the statement. In "your beloved town" the ascription of positive characteristics emotionalizes the argument. This is an intensifying strategy on part of the speaker. On the content level, the allegation that the perceived changes are no coincidence ties in with contemporary suspicious trends. Cartman sums up all those emerging fears in *South Park*: "You guys, I think this whole thing is a conspiracy" (S19E2). Conspiracy theories in America have a long tradition. One of the most popular contemporary conspiracy theories circulating in the US is that there would be a secret group which seeks to govern the world, creating a New World Order. According to Lantian et.al. (2017), people dislike things happening randomly. Randomness appears to be more threatening than having a visible enemy (cf. Lantian et.al. 2017). An assumption is that you can prepare for an enemy, whereas you cannot prepare for a coincidence. When viewing the changes as being caused by something, there is at least something one can fight against.

7.1.1. "Nobody cares about the people who lived here before."

Another topos of social change is that when something new comes, the old would automatically perish. This assumption fuels defensive backlash politics. In the early years of the show, back in season eight, *South Park* masterfully satirizes this topos. As the immigrants from the future become more involved in *South Park*'s day-to-day lives, Mr. Garrison finds himself required to teach classes in two languages now, including future speak. However, this institutional innovation immediately meets with opposition. Kyle is audibly upset: "Dude, hold on! This is bullcrap! If they wanna live in our time, then they should learn our language!" (S8E7). The other boys join in his protest. Kyle's word choice is striking. He addresses Mr. Garrison as "dude" and openly swears in class. Moreover, he makes use of the polarizing categories "they" as opposed to "our". By contrasting the in- and the outgroup, Kyle somehow relies on the legitimacy of the social authority of the people who have lived in *South Park* before.

The boys' outcry is a reaction to what is imposed on them. Even if they might not have had those conservative feelings in the beginning, which is likely to be true for Kyle as he is one of the more reasonable, undeceived characters in the show, the situation at hand provokes them to protest. An outgroup tries to exert control over South Park's kids, which causes a blaze of moral panic. The perceived hostility in Kyle's objection is the sum of building concerns and the subjectively perceived right for authority. Kyle's underlying argument is that they have been here before, as a result it is legitimate for them to rule over potential outsiders.

Huntington (1957: 454-455) offers a set of definitions for conservatism. Most suitably, his situational definition of conservatism construes it as a form of defense, arising from a type of historical situation which threatens an existing order. This situational theory warrants *South Park's* prevalent rendition of conservatism. Huntington's situational definition also justifies conservatism in modern America, as there is an intensifying challenge to traditional American institutions and naturalized value systems (cf. Huntington 1957: 454-455).

A conversation between Randy and a Rancher towards the end of season nineteen further emphasizes the issue of being expelled from their habitual environment:

Rancher: "I just can't keep up with this town no more. Everything's gettin' all nice and fancy. I swear I'm gonna need to get a second mortgage on the ranch just to pay muh daily expenses."

Randy: "Don't you get it? That's just what they want. Nobody cares about the people who lived here before. They want us to move, 'cause they wanna knock our houses down and build more lofts and villas!" (S19E9).

Randy refers to an invisible "they". This "they" is a genericization of the outgroup and probably includes all different actors that do not share an identity with Randy and the Rancher. For him, the people "who lived here before" would have the natural right to stay there. However, Randy feels that South Park's natives are about to be replaced, together with their outdated values and ideologies. Furthermore, Randy's statement alludes to the age-old conflict between the bourgeois, the ruling class in the capitalist society, and the proletariat, the hardworking people among which he sees himself. The sentiment that nobody cares about the people who have been there before, passes into the next chapter.

7.2. "Nobody cares what the Whites have to say!"

With the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Act¹⁹, one of the major threats to the conservatives desired status quo is the emancipation of non-whites in America. The election of Barack Obama

¹⁹ Signed April 11, 1968, by Lyndon B. Johnson.

into the executive office in 2008 sharpened the situation. Despite high hopes that this could have been a giant stride towards disarming racist discourse, it proved to spur rightist thoughts instead.

Racist issues play into the sentiment of replacement. In season twenty-one, *South Park* satirically approaches this never-ending story by personifying all white people as Mr. Bob White. Mr. White is a stereotypical portrayal of the contemporary conservative voter, proud of his heritage and stubborn in his beliefs. The last episode of season twenty-one becomes the arena for Mr. White's concerns. Halfway through the episode, Mr. White leaves his house with some food and starts whistling. When he proceeds to put the food on the floor he is suddenly stopped:

Randy: "What are you doing, Bob?"

Bob White: "Aah!"

Randy: [*Randy is joined by Steven, Linda, Sharon and Roger*] "Have you been putting food out for the president?"

Bob White: "No, I was just, uh, taking these sandwiches to the trash."

Randy: "We all agreed not to feed him so he'd go away."

Bob White: "We didn't all agree! You all agreed! Nobody asked the Whites how they felt! Nobody cares what the Whites have to say!"

[...]

Randy: "Give me the finger sandwiches."

Bob White: "Fine! Go ahead and take the White's sandwiches! They've taken everything else!" (S21E10).

Mr. White semantically separates himself from the rest of South Park's citizens. He extricates himself from Randy's "we" and positions himself in opposition to this "we". In Mr. White's cynical response "They've taken everything else!" (S21E10) the contrasting juxtaposition of the "we" and the "they" strongly surfaces again. Especially in Mr. White's final statement, it is not clear which group of people is referred to by "they". The purpose of this generic reference is to create distance and a personified enemy. Still, there is more to it than just "affective polarization" (see chapter 5.2.). Millions of Americans feel that they are in some ways excluded from culture, excluded from the symbolic order. This felt exclusion manifests itself as cultural rage or resentment. The felt exclusion and the resulting rage generate and justify the ideology of authoritarian populism: the excluded are excluding the ones who excluded them (Green 2007: 32).

In the 1990s a mass movement developed in the American political landscape. Examples are the militia movement, fueled by increasing gun control agenda and other federal regulations that angered many Americans. Other radical groups with racist agenda were spurred by non-white immigration which the government had failed to restrict so far (Potok 2004: 42). People feel replaced, disowned, and think the country of their forefathers is lost. All those feelings accumulate to a fertile ground for populist right-wing politics.

CHAPTER VIII: “Let’s make this country great again”

Under the abovementioned circumstances it is a piece of cake for populist right-wing politicians to mobilize followers. *South Park* mirrors these political developments, in particular by Mr. Garrison’s agenda to “make this country great again” (S19E2). His declaration suggests that this country has once been great before. The determiner ‘this’ assigns a certain proximity to the ‘country’. Also, the speaker creates a sense of imagined community, as he refers to an unknown ‘we’ by saying “let’s”. The symbolization of Mr. Garrison, his fictional character representing a nonfictional social actor, is a form of over-determination. This chapter points up the dilemma of US conservatism, by challenging a statement that has disillusioned many American conservatives in the first half of the current presidency: “Let’s make this country great again”. On the one hand, populism lures in large numbers of people who feel disadvantaged. On the other hand, the prospect of an uncertain future makes keeping populism’s promises virtually impossible.

8.1. “LEAD US 2 THE GREATNESS!!”

Generally, populism’s rhetoric is characterized by its concentration towards “the people”, defining “the people” as everybody who favors the populist’s case. According to Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008: 3), populism pits the “virtuous people” against a dangerous “other” which is depicted as depriving the sovereign people of their rights, values, and identity. The splits and discrepancies in society are populism’s hobbyhorse. Consequently, populism has a dividing, not uniting agenda. Moreover, populism is not restricted to a political position, as both liberal and conservative populism exist. Over the seasons, *South Park* is continuously confronted with various forms of populism. In season nineteen, Mr. Garrison becomes a showpiece of rightist populism.

Mr. Garrison: “Seems like everyone's afraid to speak the truth around here! Well I'm throwin' my hat in and sayin' I'll figure this thing out! Now I might not understand politics, or immigration policies, or... the law. Or basic... ideological... concepts. But dammit I understand that there's a bunch of Canadians here and I'm gonna do somethin' about it!” [*applause and cheers*] (S19E2).

Mr. Garrison accentuates the problem of Canadian immigration. He positions himself against “everyone” who is “afraid to speak the truth”, which symbolizes a political elite allegedly not capable of catering for the common people. By indicating his reservation “I might not understand politics” Mr. Garrison employs a mitigating strategy. The use of the modal verb “might” expresses epistemic modality. Moreover, Mr. Garrison’s utterance violates the maxim of quantity. He makes his contribution more informative than it would be required for the current purpose. Also, an objectivation of the Canadians takes place, by referring to them as a bunch, usually a unit of

measurement. Mr. Garrison's rhetoric achieves an identification with the people, by trivializing himself he is on a par with the people and distinguishes himself from the political elite.

Mr. Garrison's way of thinking and expressing his opinion quickly finds adherents. Even before Mr. Garrison announces his candidacy, there are supporters on his lawn carrying banners and signs. One of them reads: "LEAD US 2 THE GREATNESS!!" (S19E2). The definite article creates the impression that there is a preformed narrative of greatness. The nominalization of the adjective 'great' has the effect of magnifying its impact. The word is not only longer now but carries increased weight. The speakers, i.e. the people having written the poster, passivize themselves and render themselves as the beneficiaries of another social actor's actions. After all, what is it that should be conserved? 'Greatness' seems to be a very vague goal. There is discordance in conservative opinions about what is desirable and what not. Contemporary conservatism has different branches; however, they are all rooted in the ideological believe that change is undesirable.²⁰ Mr. Garrison unifies different standpoints in his all-encompassing sudden traditionalism. He declares: "Friends. I think I've proven that my policies work to get things done. I know what my true calling is, and I'm gonna keep this goin' all the way to Washington" (S19E2). By addressing his listeners collectively as "friends" Mr. Garrison creates a sense of community. In addition, his speech act is performative, i.e. it brings about a new reality: Mr. Garrison running for president. Mr. Garrison fulfills the felicity conditions as he announces the candidacy for himself.

Without disregarding populism's unifying character, there are also downsides to it. One downside which *South Park* increasingly capitalizes on in its three latest seasons is that of an unpredictable future, that populism cannot avert.

8.2. "For the first time I'm really scared for the future."

As mentioned above, the reverse of the medal of populism is an uncertain future. In spite of populism's grand words, it is still just as powerless concerning future planning as any other political organization. *South Park* juxtaposes people's euphoric overreliance on the one hand and disillusioned insecurities on the other. This juxtaposition makes its way up into *South Park*'s political elites. Towards the end of his presidential campaign, Mr. Garrison speaks to the nation:

"My fellow Americans, we live in an unprecedented time of uncertainty. I want to speak to you human-to-human because with God's grace, this will be the last time you ever hear from me. [...] There is only one thing that matters now. On November eighth, you must vote against me, and show the world that you didn't think the new Star Wars was all that good. When you're in that voting booth, remember that every vote for Hillary Clinton is a vote that shows the world we agree that The Force Awakens was more like a happy day

²⁰ See chapter II, page 12.

reunion's special than a movie. The choice is yours, America. Please make the right one" (S20E6).

In this speech, Mr. Garrison mostly articulates on the metaphorical level. To me, this is intriguing as his language tends to be strikingly simple when promoting himself, however, now he applies more obscure expressions. The metaphor "we agree that The Force Awakens was more like a happy day reunion's special than a movie" implies that Mr. Garrison finally realizes that the rehashed conservatism he represents is not that desirable after all. Yet, the appeal to the people, a central populist characteristic, is still present. This appeal manifests in the collectivizations "fellow Americans", "we", and "America". Mr. Garrison's entire speech could be interpreted as a face-saving act. Despite his self-deprecating words, he intends to uphold the positive social value he claims for himself. His first sentence points towards an "unprecedented time of uncertainty". This narrative is a major fuel for fears within the population. Uncertainty is one factor that conservatism seeks to contain in its opposition to change. Moreover, the notion that this uncertain situation is "unprecedented", never been there before, encourages the standpoint that novelties are not always desirable.

Once again, the Marsh family provides a forum for those conflicting stances; euphoria versus disillusionment.

Randy: "Well, I don't know about you guys, but I sure am excited. America is going to be great again. Aren't you excited, gang?"

Shelly: "No I'm not excited! It sucks, Dad! This country is gonna suck for four years!"

Randy: "Aww, come on, Shelly. We've learned that women can be anything. Except for President."

Sharon: "Randy! You just spent the last month convincing me that the only reason people wanted to go back was because of a childish nostalgia they all had for the new Star Wars!"

Randy: "Have you really watched it, Sharon? It has more to offer than just nostalgia. Let's all watch it again tonight" (S20E7).

After the presidential elections, the family is still in two minds about the results. The political discussion turns the Marsh's dinner table into a public sphere, where they debate issues that affect their lives. Shelly openly voices her concerns when claiming "This country is gonna suck for four years!" (S20E7). The exclamation marks intensify the strength of her point. She also contradicts her father's implicatory tag question. Moreover, asymmetric and patriarchal power relations between men and women are also brought forward in this scene. In the end, Randy seeks to persuade his family to watch the movie again together, but it seems as if he had to persuade himself, too. The majority of the family is disappointed and doubts their future outlook.

While Sharon trivializes the significance of the conservative vote by referring to it as "childish nostalgia" in this scene, Caitlyn Jenner has a different view on it. In the same episode Caitlyn argues: "Maybe some people enjoy nostalgia and going back to what feels comfortable"

(S20E7). “What feels comfortable” can be understood as the opposite of insecurity and uncertainty. For Caitlyn, nostalgia seems to be the solution to growing fears of the future. In addition, Caitlyn’s rendering of nostalgia is meant to reflect the construction of discourse and takes a share in it too. With vocabulary, every speaker lexicalizes experience and constructs social reality. Therefore, Caitlyn’s paraphrase suggests a reconceptualization of nostalgia in her own interest. The “maybe” gives her argument a tentative trait and hints at her own inability to explain Mr. Garrison’s election victory.

Eventually, Cartman is once again the show’s character who puts his finger on the problem. While fear of uncertainty spreads not only in South Park’s small-scale universe but all over the globe, Cartman voices the central concern many people find themselves struggling with.

Heidi: “Hey, are you okay? This election really got to you too, huh?”

Cartman: “Yes, Heidi. For the first time I’m really scared for the future.”

Heidi: “Me too, babe. [*scoots in and rests her head on his shoulder*] Me too” (S20E7).

This short exchange is characterized by ellipsis. Both speakers often intentionally omit phrases that have been uttered by the speaker before them. In doing so, an internal cohesion is ensured. The repetition “me too” is used to foreground the argument. Cartman’s assertion that it is “for the first time” reinforces the unparalleled nature of the situation. That sums up the dilemma of conservatism. While holding on to traditional and long-established values, some people lose sight of the problems of the present and even more so the challenges of the future.²¹ Drawing on people’s fear of change, their concern for safety, and nostalgic feelings populism is able to mobilize a great number of people. *South Park* encapsulates these factors and reflects American society in multiple ways.

²¹ This fear for the future is only partially justifiable. Farhang and Yaver (2016: 415) make clear that, due to constitutional restrictions, the American President is not as powerful as he might think or display himself to be.

CHAPTER IX: CONCLUSION

As a politically ambivalent TV show, *South Park* has crossover potential. *South Park* produces a sense of reality and erodes accepted narratives of hegemonic power. The TV show *South Park* is commercial and subversive at the same time. It produces, affirms, and circulates dominant meanings while also attacking, criticizing, and negotiating these. The show is an effective mirror of a divided nation due to its incredible intertextuality and bold recontextualization of competing discourses. The aim of this thesis has been to analyze the conservative bias in *South Park* in its portrayal of a politically polarized nation. At times of steady right-drifting politics and an ever-increasing political polarization, it is meaningful to investigate how popular media deals with the political reality.

The mountaintown South Park is characterized as a chiefly conservative community by three fundamental factors. Firstly, the majority of South Park's citizens favors social continuity and appears to be opposed to change in general. Secondly, pessimism concerning change marks the townspeople's political bias. Finally, the show reverts to the image of the 'mystical fatherland', an image that held generations of Americans together. As myth works by turning culture into nature, *South Park*'s conservatives believe that their imagined community, their common heritage is natural. *South Park*'s rendition of conservatism complies with the situational definition of conservatism which construes conservatism as a form of defense, reacting to threats to an existing order.

In my paper, I have investigated in what ways *South Park* reflects the polarization of US American politics. To begin with, *South Park* mirrors the geographical trends which emphasize the American nation's partisan polarization, i.e. conservatives often living in the periphery. The clustering of politically like-minded results in intensified and persistent ideology. Moreover, the notion of a secluded community is central for South Park's citizens and virtually parallels the American situation. *South Park* capitalizes on people's tendency to associate with others who think similarly and, resultingly, reflects polarization on a micro level. Next, I have examined the claim for a disappearing political center. The title of my paper, "Our nation is divided like never before" (S20E1), already hints at this claim. In order to prove my theory, I call attention to the increasing bimodal distribution of ideologies, rather than on a classic left-to-right continuum. South Park's townspeople display this hyper-ideological extremism in various ways. Throughout the seasons, lexical choices strongly accentuate the notion of dividedness. In the end, the bipolar division of society makes people visualize their ideological opponents as enemies. When political views influence the ways in which individuals perceive others it is referred to as 'affective polarization'. Affective polarization is fostered by competitive environments such as political campaigns. As a result, negative campaigning is the offspring of political polarization. In *South Park*, presidential

campaigns are the arena for cross-partisan hostility. Another factor contributing to polarization is political factions disagreeing on multiple issues at a time, generating conflict extension. In *South Park*'s microcosm, polarizing conflicts extend on several levels too, in particular regarding domestic policy. America's multi-issue polarization and the thought of either-or issues is replicated in many *South Park* episodes. Some particularly polarizing issues that *South Park* continuously picks up on are the value of tradition and religious morals, gay rights, foreign military policy, immigration, and unemployment. There are enormous discrepancies in both the American and *South Park*'s population regarding these issues.

In order to find out how the polarizing political conflicts are played out on *South Park*'s small stage, I have analyzed selected episodes according to CDA. What I propose is that *South Park*'s citizens originally see their town as a morally unflawed place. In *South Park*, where the nuclear family is still the norm, homosexuals and single parents, for instance, are branded as deviant. As a result, political conflicts are usually approached from an ideologically conservative standpoint. However, it cannot be concluded that *South Park* is an inherently conservative show, as it constantly challenges conservative views, religious institutions, and long-established belief systems. It is the townspeople's conservative stance which frequently causes confusion and incites speculations about the show's inherent ideology. Up to now, publications on *South Park* have had broad-ranging views on the show's political implications. I claim that the show's own ideology is not overt, if there is ideology behind the show, it is blurred by *South Park*'s townspeople's conservative inclinations. One of the polarizing issues *South Park* satirizes is abortion and the debates surrounding this controversy. The absence of the pro-life discourse reveals that it is the naturalized discourse, originating from the dominant group in the show's universe. By contrast, *South Park* brands the pro-choice argument as oppositional discourse. *South Park* expands the polarizing issue of pro-life versus pro-choice to the discussions regarding embryonic stem cell research. *South Park* hints at the sheer abundance of ethical and logical considerations connected with embryonic stem cell research. Another issue that divides the minds is gay rights, the battle being primarily fought over same-sex marriage. *South Park* addresses this issue in a number of episodes, regularly questioning heteronormativity and satirizing homophobia. In this context, the power of language to propagate ideologies and social hierarchies, as well as its function as a strategy of discriminatory inclusion and exclusion become apparent. Another typical either-or issue that constitutes political polarization is warfare. The show's four main character kids function as a miniature model of society by reflecting the struggle of oppositional discourses, and both the population's hypocrisy and its naivety concerning warfare. *South Park* also acknowledges the War on Terror as one of many examples where myth contributes to shaping discourse. Myth has the power to sway opinion, as it offers justification and significance to controversial issues. Moral

panic is another phenomenon which forwards polarizing discussions in South Park's small-scale universe. Moral panic begins with a threat to the community, and consequently increases public concern and hostility. Concerning immigration policy, an oppositional discourse is entirely absent in South Park's secluded community. The dissociation from strangers and foreigners is a core concern in *South Park* (e.g. "Member feeling safe?" (S20E1)). Referential strategies are one way to build up barriers by language. The discriminated group is represented stereotypically due to a gradual naturalization of prejudice discourse. *South Park* often addresses such stereotypical representations and, while circulating such stereotypes, the show still questions the governing mechanisms behind this normalized practice. *South Park* foregrounds negative stereotyping as a means of maintaining oppressive practices. For instance, the naturalization of racist discourse in the show reveals how unequal power relations are sustained. Another dividing issue for the two opposing political camps is the role which the American government should play in economic developments. Anew, it becomes visible in what ways the polarized political debate soaks into *South Park*'s fictional realm. South Park's conservatives blame technological progress and future-oriented electronics for the undesirable development towards automation of services and consequently for the loss of jobs. With connection to this, *South Park* tackles another issue – the fear of being replaced in society. In *South Park*, parallel to American citizens, the established ingroup feels threatened by a constructed outgroup.

My final interest has been to examine how the show satirically deals with the ever more extreme political reality of the US. In recent years, America's political realm has become quite bizarre due to a change of government and a shift in what is acceptable in political discourse. That is why *South Park*'s partially absurd representations are not that far away from reality anymore. Over the last three seasons, *South Park*'s satirical strategy has become cautious yet effective. Instead of criticizing particular policy decisions, *South Park* focuses on the ways in which the events are represented and understood. This mediative interaction with contemporary events makes *South Park* a subversive reflection of the United States' mediated political reality. The changes in social hierarchies evoke fears in society. As the established social order, not only in *South Park* but all over America, is about to collapse, conservative populism enjoys a large clientele. Worrisome issues for conservatives are the decline of patriarchy and other processes that threaten the status quo. Those concerns feed into one overarching narrative: what was once theirs now belongs to someone else. Another topos connected to social change is that the old will automatically perish when something new comes. This assumption fuels defensive backlash politics, a development currently traceable in the United States. Political correctness is another affair that is satirized in *South Park*. The hypocrisy of people referring to themselves as politically correct attracts *South Park*'s criticism. *South Park* emphasizes that even though political

correctness might eventually change the language applied, it does not automatically transform the underlying attitudes. With vocabulary, every speaker lexicalizes experience and constructs social life. Along these lines, *South Park* satirically approaches the seemingly never-ending story of racism in the US. The show personifies the stereotypical conservative voter in the clichéd portrayal of Mr. White. With regard to populism's promises in an ever more extreme political reality, *South Park* juxtaposes people's euphoric overreliance on the one hand and disillusioned insecurities on the other. To conclude, *South Park*'s satirically approaches both ends of the political spectrum which contributes to the show's political ambiguity.

Concerning some issues dealt with in the show, reality has caught up on satire. In an already absurd political reality *South Park* fluctuates between chances and challenges. In retrospect, it has been a quite extensive endeavor to investigate *South Park*'s representation of a divided nation on so many levels. For future research it could be worthwhile to investigate one (or some) of the issue positions sketched in CHAPTER VI. All of these positions lend themselves for perceptive studies. Also, diachronically tracing one issue at a time from the show's early stages until season twenty-one, and already season twenty-two, could be an insightful path to take. In addition, I claim that the progressing polarization of the American nation is a development that demands historians' attention. Taking an approach to this development via media representations could be rewarding.

All in all, my work has looked at *South Park* from multiple perspectives with a contemporary focus. It has been the first to provide a holistic contrastive analysis of *South Park*'s political satire of both liberal and conservative standpoints. The TV show's pseudo-informational function, a crucial part of the significance of popular media, cannot be neglected either. As popular culture plays a role in shaping and reproducing ideology, investigating popular TV shows like *South Park* is important. *South Park*'s ambiguity regarding its ideological orientation makes it an oppositional, subversive, and radically progressive show. The show, as a cultural medium, operates in the polarized interplay of two major ideologies. The statement I employed in the title, "Our nation is divided like never before" (S20E1), reflects exactly this state of the nation. Americans find themselves in a politically split society. *South Park* mimics the implications of such a far-reaching polarization in the setting of the conservative small-town South Park.

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