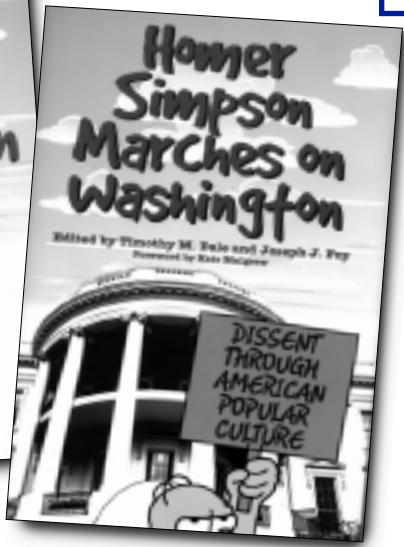
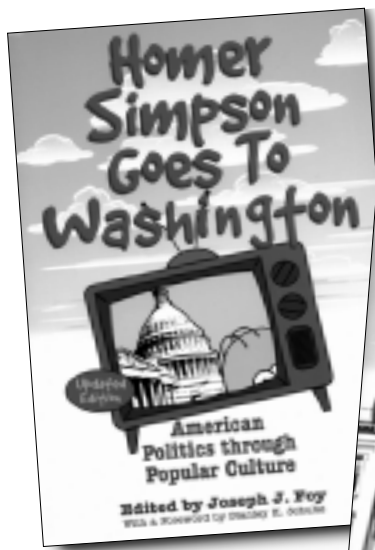


# REVIEWS



## Homer Simpson Goes to Washington: American Politics through Popular Culture, Updated Edition

Joseph J. Foy, Editor  
Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008, updated 2010  
288 pp., \$21.95, Paper  
ISBN: 978-0-8131-9254-3

## Homer Simpson Marches on Washington: Dissent through American Popular Culture

Timothy M. Dale and Joseph J. Foy, Editors  
Lexington, KY:  
The University Press of Kentucky, 2010  
320 pp., \$32.50, Cloth  
ISBN: 978-0-8131-2580-0

According to Nielsen Media Research, 99% of Americans have at least one television in their home and average 28 hours per week watching television. With the advent of smart phones, viewing time of both television shows and movies is growing. As such, both *Homer Simpson Goes to Washington* and *Homer Simpson Marches on Washington* take a serious look at how society has changed as a result of popular (i.e., “pop”) culture. *The Simpsons* is perhaps the best representative of the scope and reach of pop culture on society. It is both the longest running American situational comedy (sitcom) and longest running American animated program. Its popularity is such that a 2006 report by the McCormick Tribune Foundation found that 22 percent of the population can name all five Simpson family characters, but only 0.1 percent can name all five freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment. The effect of television, film, and music are examined in *Homer Simpson Goes to Washington* and *Homer Simpson Marches on Washington*. Both of these books are required reading in some college courses learning about popular culture’s effect on our nation.

*Homer Simpson Goes to Washington* was first published in 2008. Edited by Joseph Foy (assistant professor, University of Wisconsin-Waukesha), he and 15 members of academia provide articles on different subjects in three sections. Part 1 starts by introducing how popular culture, in the form of television and films, began influencing societal norms. Part 2 focuses on our government —

politicians, court system, etc. — and its portrayal in pop culture. And Part 3 covers civil liberties, foreign policy, and how music popularized protest. In 2010, the updated edition was published and features a new afterword discussing how pop culture has influenced our new political reality. From the economic crisis, to

“movie star” politicians, and the prophetic vision of the 1957 film classic, *A Face in the Crowd* (a cynical take on the power of media and celebrity), it is clear that pop culture has changed how political races are run today.

Expanding on these themes, in 2010 Joseph Foy and Timothy Dale (assistant professor, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay) edited *Homer Simpson Marches on Washington*, which looks at how the medium is the message. This book is also divided into three parts: Part 1—Popular Culture as Public Space; Part 2—Popular Culture and Oppositional Narratives; and Part 3—Popular Culture and the Dynamics of Dissent and Social Change. The foreword by Kate Mulgrew (Captain Janeway, *Star Trek: Voyager*) introduces us to how, through her lens as an actress, pop culture can affect change. Mulgrew relates how absurd it felt for her to give a speech at a White House event honoring women scientists. But she learned that her character had influenced some of these women to move beyond the lab, to actual fieldwork, and work among the stars.

Even entertainment news shows and their parodies influence those who are not typically politically interested. In Part 1, Jamie Warner (Marshall University) looks at the influence of *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* on society. *The Daily Show* satirizes our current political atmosphere. Jon Stewart and his cast look beyond the political hyperbole, revealing the truth underneath; they focus on the absurdities in politics that conventional reporting can’t (or won’t) discuss.

The authors in Part 2 depict shows, and stars, that rail against societal norms. Author Peter Caster (University of South Carolina Upstate) analyzes views on incarceration, with an emphasis on Spike Lee’s *25th Hour*. While Katherine Lehman (Albright College) looks at Rosie O’Donnell’s television history, with an emphasis on her brief, and controversial, appearance on *The View* as a representative for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community.

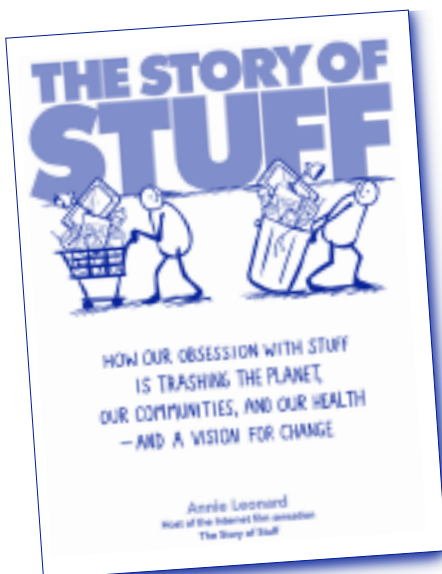
Music and its influence on pop culture is shown in Part 3. From Jerry Rodnitzky (University of Texas at Arlington) comes an analysis of music and the anti-war movement. Beginning in the 1960s, pacifism, under the spirit of Martin Luther King’s nonviolent civil rights movement, often produced

protest songs emphasizing slogans like: “Make love, not war.” But these songs also contained veiled references to violence — that sometimes “you gotta fight.” From the 1970s to 2000, protest songs represented social concerns at home and internationally, but changed again in our post-9/11 world.

Both *Homer Simpson Goes to Washington* and *Homer Simpson Marches on Washington* look at popular culture as not simply entertainment of the masses. Instead, pop culture can emphasize contemporary societal norms, or introduce new ideas and social constructs. In our new and increasingly “wired” society, these linkages will become more prevalent. Pop culture reaches a national audience, and as such, is inspiring nationwide conversations about politics, race, marriage, religion, etc. If you want to learn more about the basis for these conversations, these two books are excellent resources.

— ANNETTE AGUAYO

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## The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession with Stuff is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health — and a Vision for Change

Annie Leonard  
New York: Free Press, 2010  
352 pp., \$26.00, hardcover  
ISBN-10: 143912566X  
ISBN-13: 9781439125663

What is “stuff?” According to Annie Leonard (www.storyofstuff.com), it is manufactured or mass-produced goods, which includes packaging. A classic example would be any electronic “thing” wrapped in a plastic clamshell case (that takes scissors/knives/teeth to open). But Leonard goes further into what really goes into the making of stuff. She developed the 20-minute internet film sensation “The Story of Stuff” in 2007 to explain the process in detail. This film has been viewed more than 10 million times since then, and has been adopted by educators, organizations, and local governments across the country to

spur discussions about the nature of stuff and why we should care.

What you can’t say in a 20-minute film is expanded upon by Leonard in *The Story of Stuff: How Our Obsession with Stuff is Trashing the Planet, Our Communities, and Our Health — and a Vision for Change*. In this book she explains in greater detail what spurred her to look at the life cycle of stuff. Leonard has worked on sustainability and environmental health issues for more than 20 years. She has investigated factories and dumps around the world; she knows what goes into making, and disposing, of stuff.

Did you know that the United States makes up 5% of the world’s population, but consumes 30% of its resources, and produces 30% of its waste? *The Story of Stuff* looks in detail at the life cycle of stuff. From extraction of the raw components necessary to make stuff, the production and distribution networks to get stuff to consumers, how we consume stuff, and how we dispose of it when we’re done. Leonard does offer alternatives to traditional, toxic paths. She also suggests in the Epilogue a shift in thinking about stuff.

Leonard details the life cycle of certain goods. For example, the resources used in a cotton t-shirt start with water (most of which is lost to evaporation), as well as the insecticides and fertilizers used to grow the cotton. Energy is used by machines to process the cotton, then the chemical bleaches are used on the cotton prior to coloring process. Add the chemicals necessary to make the cotton softer, wrinkle-resistant, etc. Then someone makes the t-shirt (i.e., in sweatshops), exposing workers to all of those chemicals. She also looks at the distribution chains of stores like H & M and Wal-Mart. Those processes include the energy used to bring the items to market, plus the money and resources used on the advertising campaign. Wow, that’s a lot of stuff that’s used to make and sell a t-shirt.

Now having and wanting stuff is not all bad, according to Leonard. Where it goes wrong is when we obsess on needing more stuff; that having/acquiring stuff is linked into our personal self-worth. The paradigm needs to change, because when we really know what goes into the making of the stuff we have, we appreciate it more, and we want to keep it around longer, until we wring every last use from it. We need to look at the big picture of the nature of stuff, and its global impact. We need to work more as a community — borrowing, lending, and trading stuff — so we, collectively, have a smaller footprint on the planet.

This book takes a close look at how “stuff” truly controls our lives. We spend countless hours working to pay for stuff. Instead, we should be more mindful about our lives — do we really need the latest and greatest “thing?” Or should life have more meaning than the sum of our stuff?

— ANNETTE AGUAYO

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