

All Is Not as It Seems: A Critical Film Review of Bureaucracy, Democracy, Social Equity and Justice in Zootopia

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Introduction

Bureaucracy remains a formidable barrier to advancing social equity and justice, and films can shape, reinforce, or create perceptions of social reality (Bharath 2021). This film review critically analyzes the portrayal of bureaucracy and democracy in Disney’s 2016 animated film, *Zootopia*. *Zootopia* idealistically explores utopian beliefs that democracy and bureaucracy can coexist, but distorted (albeit realistic) images of governance and administration demonstrate tensions between democracy and bureaucracy. The film illustrates how bureaucracy limits democracy through issues of governance, accountability, diversity, inclusion, social equity, justice, and race relations.

In this review, we use a critical social equity lens to examine inequities that emerge in the film as the characters engage with bureaucracy. Through unpacking the actions and behaviors of *Zootopia*’s primary characters that operate in bureaucratic government systems (see Table 1), we challenge ideological assumptions ingrained in *Zootopia* by highlighting scenes depicting discrimination, stereotyping, prejudice, and their normalization in Zootopia’s governance.

Summary of *Zootopia*

In Zootopia, a city where anthropomorphic animals live harmoniously together, a bureaucrat’s plot to destroy democracy develops from within the bureaucracy. *Zootopia* follows Judy Hopps, a bunny who dreams of being a police officer to “make the world a better place” (Howard and Moore 2016). Societal norms threaten her dream until Judy joins the Mammal Inclusion Initiative (MII), gaining entrance into the Zootopia Police Academy (ZPA). Despite challenges within the initiative, Judy uses her small size to navigate barriers. She turns obstacles into opportunities, making the system work for her in ways that position her at the top of her class, becoming the first bunny police officer in the Zootopia Police Department (ZPD). Judy then migrates to the gleaming, urban capital city, Zootopia, where anthropomorphic animals of all species (predator and prey) harmoniously coexist (Fuentes 2021). Opportunities abound so any animal can realize all their dreams and “anyone can be anything” (Howard and Moore 2016)—a utopia. Judy soon discovers Zootopia’s reality (Fuentes 2021)—its systems and processes, governance and functioning, and actions and behaviors of the leaders reflect the inner workings of a dystopian bureaucracy.

Table 1. *Zootopia*’s Primary Characters

Name	Species	Gender	Predator or Prey	Role in film
Judy Hopps	Rabbit	Female	Prey	Primary protagonist
Nicholas (Nick) Wilde	Fox	Male	Predator	A jaded and disillusioned citizen of Zootopia who partners with Judy
Chief Bogo	Buffalo	Male	Predator	Zootopia’s Chief of Police
Leodore Lionheart	Lion	Male	Predator	Zootopia’s Mayor
Dawn Bellwether	Sheep	Female	Prey	Assistant Mayor and primary antagonist

Bureaucracy for All, Democracy for Some

Public opinion can be shaped by portrayals of bureaucracy and how the government addresses societal issues (Bharath 2021). Bureaucracy is ingrained with hierarchy and rigidity in systems, rules, and processes for the equal implementation of public policy. However, bureaucracy often does not consider inequity, which includes disparities in outcomes and whether democratic principles include the public being served. *Zootopia*'s governance appears public but is not transparent. *Zootopia* comprises 12 unique centralized ecosystems and uses a strong mayor governance model with an assistant mayor but no apparent representation of the other ecosystems. There is a semblance of representative bureaucracy as the predator (Mayor Lionheart) works with the prey (Assistant Mayor Bellwether). Mayor Lionheart is the perceivable voice of *Zootopia*'s governance (with primary decision-making power and little or no oversight from others), while Assistant Mayor Bellwether is the administrative functionary, taking orders from Mayor Lionheart. This top-down approach, where public servants are given orders despite their input, expertise, and experiences, is also demonstrated by Chief Bogo, who is not consulted on implementing the MII. The lack of transparency and collaboration creates a hostile and resentful bureaucratic environment and system that results in corruption and discrimination, as shown later in the movie.

Zootopia actively reinforces negative stereotypes of bureaucracy and the public sector, using specific characteristics of animals to portray bureaucrats and society as a whole. For example, the Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) is staffed with sloths (Howard and Moore 2016) to reinforce the stereotypical cumbersome structure of the DMV—long lines, slow service, inefficient customer service, excessive red tape, and overbearing bureaucracy. In addition, several scenes question the goals of public service and bureaucracy. For instance, Judy's initial ZPD assignment was working as a "meter maid." Despite her dissatisfaction with the position, she decides to exceed her parking ticket quota of 100 by issuing 201 parking citations, going so far as giving herself a citation when her parking meter expired. Judy exemplifies the expectation of bureaucrats to be efficient, effective, and economical while delivering public services without discretion, and ignoring factors such as equity, empathy, and ethics. Judy's extreme efficiency

and effectiveness generate dissatisfaction from members of the public, begging the question of who Judy serves: the public, the bureaucratic system, or her ego?

The Illusion of Inclusion

Democracy promotes a place for everyone in government, yet bureaucratic structures and societal norms limit full access to and participation in a democratic society. Genuine efforts for inclusion are vital; however, *Zootopia* illustrates the illusion of inclusion most evident in the MII. MII's success is limited to its ability to impact democracy by giving access to historically marginalized groups to participate in public service. Although well-intentioned, the initiative fails to consider the equitable treatment of small species. Judy faces harassment and discrimination in an institution dominated by larger predator species and ingrained masculine values, challenging her ability to succeed. She quickly learns that she is a token for inclusion and that systemic changes were not factored into the MII. In reality, rigid bureaucratic structures, internalized culture, and rhetoric limit her access and sense of belonging. Judy navigates the system in creative ways to achieve what she believes she can, while bureaucratic structures remain in place to limit her ability for success.

In the ZPD, Judy further confronts patriarchal structures and systems. Identifying as a young "cute" bunny, prey, and female, Judy is subjected to sexism, ageism, and speciesism, which combine to create intersectional discrimination and marginalization of her talents. Judy must go above and beyond boundaries to prove her worthiness as a police officer just to be seen as an equal. Regardless, her role as a police officer was unfairly reduced to "meter maid"—the safest job on the force—despite her stellar performance and dedication in the ZPA. These scenes in the film show how implementing an inclusion initiative within a restrictive, bureaucratic structure was an incomplete thought and naïve assumption of reengineering an inequitable system to one open to everyone (Abernathy 2009). Judy's marginalized intersecting identity was tokenized to promote an illusion of inclusion, limiting the advancement of social equity. Judy is overlooked for impactful work assignments and is ultimately faced with working within the confines of a bureaucratic system that portrays inclusion through representation only.

Accessibility is another challenge for smaller-sized

bureaucrats (Judy and Assistant Mayor Bellwether), as the bureaucratic facilities favor larger predator species, which is seen in the film when encountering bathroom amenities. Smaller bureaucrats are also rendered invisible or small through oversized office desks or small office spaces tucked away in a closet. This is especially challenging for Judy, who is removed from the view of Chief Boggo as she is consumed by the larger desk and chair size not designed for smaller animals. Judy's work ethic and success as a police officer are minimized as she is not given the essential resources to be successful in her new role as a police officer. *Zootopia* repeatedly positions prey to administrative roles that provide the perception of power in an attempt to redress inequities, but this is a facade within Zootopia's bureaucracy.

All Is Not as It Seems

"Fear, Treachery, Bloodlust!" (Howard and Moore 2016, 0:58). *Zootopia's* first three words are strategically spoken to begin the movie and set the stage for a complex plot and allegory to racism, segregation, and discrimination supported by an inequitable system of bureaucracy. Fear is used as a tool to control Zootopia's population. Fear also emerges as an invisible mechanism perpetuating negative stereotypes, labels, discrimination, and prejudices. Assistant Mayor Bellwether, the evil mastermind, states, "Fear always works!" (Howard and Moore 2016). She leverages fear as a manipulation tactic to divide predators and prey, gain power, and undermine the integrity of Zootopia's bureaucratic machinery.

Treachery draws attention to power dynamics, manipulation, and deception, and is demonstrated by the actions of characters who exploit and manipulate others. For example, Assistant Mayor Bellwether conceals her true intentions using her positionality as a timid and meek prey working to foster inclusion to create a more equitable system of governance. Her soft tone and recantation of "us little guys really need to stick together" (Howard and Moore 2016) belies her true intent for fearmongering. Judy consciously and unconsciously demonstrates treachery as she leverages her power to assist Nicholas (Nick) Wilde, a citizen (fox) who faces discrimination. She then manipulates Nick into helping her navigate bureaucratic systems.

The film deceptively casts prey such as Judy and Assistant Mayor Bellwether as victims who stand against the system. Judy is depicted as the heroine who demon-

strates perseverance, commitment, determination, and courage and whom viewers should champion as she uses her platform to create space for other previously marginalized animals. However, Judy, with only two days of tenure on the ZPD, bounces through systemic and bureaucratic barriers to disrupt the ZPD and leaps to conclusions that unknowingly advance Assistant Mayor Bellwether's plot to ostracize predators and incite tensions across the entire Zootopia population. Assistant Mayor Bellwether works within the system to create change that benefits "her" public. Their comparative characterization suggests powerlessness but alludes to privilege, fragility, and a deeply entrenched sense of superiority.

The concept of bloodlust is multidimensional and seen through the "savage" behavior and the narrative that predators revert to their "aggressive hunting instincts and their primitive, savage ways" (Howard and Moore 2016). The portrayal of "savagery" reflects harmful negative stereotypes of inherent violence and aggressive behavior often foisted on bodies of color. Predators are instantly criminalized based on their identities and viewed as inherently dangerous. Invisible is the fact that predators are pawns in a larger scheme. Their "biological" aggression is being used to fuel a narrative to topple Zootopia's current governance system and create a system that prioritizes prey. The film oversimplifies the complexities of how fear, treachery, and bloodlust, as depicted within the bureaucracy, fuel segregation and discrimination while limiting inclusion, equity, and democracy.

Conclusion

This critical analysis of *Zootopia* explores themes related to bureaucracy, social justice, equity, stereotypes, discrimination, segregation, and personal growth. The parallel in the film tells different stories, and in many instances, the inferences based on juxtaposed roles are so subtle they go unnoticed. Viewers may take the film at face value, where the central characters' motivations are rooted in challenging prejudice, seeking justice, and personal growth rather than seeking personal glory. A critical social equity lens identifies how negative predator stereotypes criminalize and reinforce segregation and discrimination while supporting victimized, meek prey. The overenthusiastic, cute bunny is the relentless heroine who sacrifices everything she

has ever dreamed of to challenge injustice and the bureaucratic apparatus. Meanwhile, a hopeful fox (Nick) rarely escapes his negative stereotype. A meek, timid sheep (Assistant Mayor Bellwether) endures abuse to advance inclusion but manipulates the bureaucratic system to foster change for a select group at the detriment of others. The problematic nature of these characters is almost overshadowed by their depiction as meek prey, representing privileged positionality. The language used to describe predators is negative, seeking to criminalize and villainize, making predators symbols of the racial “others.”

Disney represents a new face of neoliberal power that provides entertainment and shapes the identities, desires, and subjectivities of millions across the globe (Sandlin and Svana 2018). *Zootopia's* depiction of government is flawed, with biased images of bureaucrats and residents navigating, working within, and overall experiencing bureaucracy. The different animal species in *Zootopia* become an allegory for different racial groups, and characters are othered through coded and implied behavior, language, and character development (Sandlin and Snaza 2018). Specific characters are stereotypically othered as less than or criminal through creative tactics that devalue and delegitimize some identities. Speciesism is an allegory for racism, and deception lurks in the language and characterization. This critical analysis of the film shows that bureaucracy disrupts democracy, there is an illusion of inclusion, and a children's movie

highlights how segregation and discrimination stymies social equity. As public administrators focus more on advancing social equity in bureaucratic systems, careful attention to meaning derived from language, symbols, images, thoughts, and words is vital. *Zootopia's* analysis conveys how bureaucratic systems can camouflage oppression, reinforce negative stereotypes and prejudices, and promote discrimination and segregation, while seemingly working toward equity. The parallel in current society resonates as people reckon with how they navigate current governance systems.

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