

# The Politics of the Superhero

## Introduction

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This symposium explores the relationship of superheroes to questions of power, ideology, social relations, and political culture. It represents the first time that a political science journal has devoted sustained attention to the superhero genre as it is reflected in the pages of comic books and graphic novels, and on the big screen.

Broadly speaking, political scientists have not had much to say about popular culture as a reflection of and contributor to political discourse and action. The discipline has mostly ceded this intellectual territory to sociology, anthropology, and the humanities. A quick Google search, for example, will confirm that North American colleges and universities offer many more courses on “the sociology of popular culture” than on “the politics of popular culture.” Although a substantial scholarly literature exists on the nexus of politics and film, as well as a much smaller literature on politics and video games, pop music, television, and comics, political scientists have not played a decisive role in this arena. It should be obvious that popular culture addresses and confronts political questions in all sorts of ways and on all sorts of levels.

Consider, for example, the superhero genre, which has arguably become a constituent feature of contemporary popular culture. At the most basic level, the idea of super-empowered individuals clashing with one another and interacting with ordinary mortals can be traced back to ancient mythology. The superhero borrowed from archaic legends, but also depended on the advent of cheap printing, mass literacy, and leisure time in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the concomitant appearance of paraliterary books and magazines that featured exciting, often exotic stories, characters, and settings. The genre assumed its contemporary form with the introduction of Superman in the pages of *Action Comics* in the late 1930s, whose commercial success inspired the creation of hundreds of broadly similar characters whose exploits have subsequently provided con-

tent for a full spectrum of visual and print media. Today, the figure of the superhero turns up in all kinds of places, from licensed products and advertising campaigns to murals and literary fiction.

No matter how narrowly or broadly we define the term “politics,” superheroes—by their very nature as cultural representations of super-empowered individuals—mirror, comment on, and sometimes parody the kinds of ideas, movements, policies, and institutions that interest political scientists. From their inception, superheroes have interacted with elected officials, political candidates, and law enforcement personnel. Costumed heroes have been involved in wars both cold and hot, engaged in espionage, campaigned for public office, endorsed political causes, and even gone on strike.<sup>1</sup> They have taken stands on public controversies from the Vietnam War to gay marriage, and their stories routinely reference and comment on real-world events, from rising crime rates to catastrophic terrorism. Several superheroes have names and origin stories that more or less require them to adopt political stances, from Animal Man and the Punisher to Hawk and Dove, and recently a smattering of superheroes have come out of the closet. As all of this suggests, writers, artists, editors, and publishers have used superhero characters and stories as vehicles for commentary and debate.

The superhero genre thus offers multiple points of entry for political analysis. Superheroes are by definition larger than life and cast a bright light on the more familiar social world they are both part of and detached from. The genre is exceptionally malleable: it can be used as a conduit for other entertainment genres, from space opera and cops-and-robbers to romantic comedy and social parody. This adaptability helps explain the genre’s durability and transnational appeal. The genre can also be characterized in terms of its tendency to transform characters into icons, which means that superhero stories almost always generate some kind of metaphorical resonance. Superheroes tend to stand for something, both explicitly and by implication. Routinely dismissed as puerile and insubstantial, the genre actually addresses serious concerns and issues through its very structures and practices. This is not to suggest that every superhero title or storyline is of equal value from the standpoint of political scrutiny and criticism: far from it. Some writers and artists are more adept than others at using the tools of the genre for political and intellectual ends. But the genre itself is saturated with meaning.

Not only do superheroes regularly express political opinions; superhero storylines often present the clash of opposing viewpoints. One of the many pleasures of fan culture is the way in which it offers hardcore readers the opportunity to hash out these ideological conflicts with other committed fans. Furthermore, superheroes can shape as well reflect public opinion, by providing images, narratives, and rhetoric that can inspire action on the part of elite and nonelite actors. Even when the stories fail to provoke a public response, they can speak to public concerns. As a result of its emphasis on exaggerated human forms, for example, the genre speaks to long-standing anxieties about scientific progress, genetics, and eugenics. At the same time, they are almost by definition preoccupied with notions of masculinity and femininity and with competing representations and conceptions of the body. Superheroes can serve as models of human perfection but also as cautionary tales about the dangers of interfering with the evolutionary process.

From the 1930s onwards, the genre has enjoyed a powerful connection to the modern city in which superheroes conduct their business. The distinction between Superman and Batman, for example, hinges not only on their different powers and origin stories, but on their incompatible assessment of the costs and benefits of urban life. The superhero genre rehearses and revisits long-standing debates about modernity and urbanity to an extent that is rarely true of other popular genres (see Ahrens and Meteling 2010).

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The superhero genre also enjoys a special connection to questions of law, justice, and public order. Superheroes typically fight crime, which means that their stories are required on some level to depict and sometimes deconstruct the boundary between the law and lawlessness. While superhero stories sometimes embrace the idea that the state is an instrument of legitimate authority, they often express the ambivalence and even hostility that many citizens feel toward their own government. Superheroes regularly interfere with the normal prerogatives of states, implying that legal processes are insufficient, and perhaps even that inner-directed morality is superior to other-directed legality. Not surprisingly, superhero stories often return to the question of the merits and limitations of vigilantism and unbridled or unregulated power, whether in the hands of individuals or public authorities. From the standpoint of the rest of us, the superhero constitutes an obvious example of “the other,” but at the same time, superheroes can be wielded as propagandistic icons of nationalism, patriotism, and ethnicity designed to divide in-groups from out-groups.

The industry itself provides a terrain of political contestation. There have been successive efforts to unionize writers

and artists at major comic book publishers, although none of these efforts have gained significant traction. During the early Cold War, the industry was the target of a sustained anticomics campaign. Comics publishers responded by imposing the most stringent self-censorship code of any media industry in the twentieth century. More recently, the industry has been at the forefront of battles over intellectual property rights, authorial credit, and the return of original art. One knowledgeable observer has found that the comic book subculture as a whole leans in a “blue state” direction, as measured by the “overrepresentation” of comic book stores in big cities, college towns, and coastal states, and their consequent “underrepresentation” in rural counties and small population states in the south, southwest, and mountain states (Miller 2005). The liberal slant of many creative personnel, combined with the geographic concentration of regular comic book buyers, is sometimes reflected in the content of the stories themselves.

The development of a scholarly literature on superheroes has arguably lagged behind the development of comics scholarship more generally. “Until recently, the most compelling contributions to comics scholarship focused on historical, political, autobiographical, avant-garde, and other ‘serious minded’ comics” precisely because these are the “kinds of studies that complicated or upend longstanding suppositions regarding the medium’s inherently juvenile and unserious nature” (Hatfield, Heer, and Worcester 2013, xi). The first book on the topic to appear in English, Jules Feiffer’s *The Great Comic Book Heroes*

(1965), provided a witty but cynical survey of the world’s most famous superhero characters. Books and articles that followed in the wake of Feiffer’s wry text were mostly aimed at fans and general readers, rather than students and academics. The dramatic growth of fan culture, as reflected by the “cons” (conventions) that annually convene in New York, San Diego, Chicago, and elsewhere, as well as the aging of the core audience, has provided a material foundation for a secondary literature that emphasizes interviews with creators and lush image reproduction above historical analysis and theoretical interpretation.

During the past decade or so, however, and very much inspired by the expansion and greater sophistication of comics studies more generally, there has been a flurry of literary, historical, and even philosophical writing about superheroes. Notable examples include Bukatman (2005); Costello (2009); Dittmer (2005, 2009); Hatfield, Heer, and Worcester (2013); McLaughlin (2005); Nama (2011); Ndalianis (2009); Smith and Duncan (2012); and Weiner (2009). Two volumes that anticipated this new wave of superhero scholarship are Pearson and Uricchio (1991) and Reynolds (1994). This flurry of academic interest is also reflected in the pages of journals devoted to

comics studies, including the *International Journal of Comic Art*, *Studies in Comics*, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, and *European Comic Art*, as well as in books being published by the University Press of Mississippi, Routledge, Continuum, McFarland, and other trade and university presses. The fact remains that while this literature often touches on political themes, it has largely neglected to draw on or contribute to debates in political science.

Comics have been read as reflecting the cultural context in which they were created, reflecting dominant ideologies, public opinion, or the political culture of their era. Ideological readings of superheroes have been increasingly common, including a classic work by Dorfman and Mattelart (1975), as well as Hughes (2006), and Moore (2003). Cultural readings of superhero comics can deepen our understanding of public opinion and political culture by examining how certain ideas are portrayed within the context of the narrative. This common approach can be found in many works, including Costello (2009), Donovan (2012), Lang and Trimble (1988), and Pustz (2012).

Superheroes are not merely characters in stories, but can achieve iconic status. Former Alaska Senator Ted Stevens used to don his Incredible Hulk tie for potentially contentious floor votes—a subtle reminder to his colleagues of the consequences of making him angry. Will Brooker (2000) has explored the iconography of Batman, and scholars in the field of fan studies have addressed the appropriation of superheroes as symbols for social movements (see, for example, Phillips 2013,

tions and the distinctive discourses and practices of the superhero genre. We hold out the hope that the symposium can help inspire further research into the nexus of comics, culture, and politics. Indeed, our aim has been to provide a model for the kinds of informed political-cultural critique—not only on superheroes *per se* but on popular culture more generally—that we would like to see more of from our profession.

Therefore, we are gratified that the contributions to this symposium approach the superhero genre from a number of interesting angles, including modern and contemporary political theory, social allegory, feminism, and empire. The opening piece, by Claudia Franziska Brühwiler, takes up the question of what it means to be a hero, which is a recurrent issue both in superhero comics and in the writings of the twentieth-century novelist and essayist Ayn Rand. More specifically, Brühwiler's article looks at the impact of Rand's philosophy of objectivism on the work of Steve Ditko and Frank Miller, two of the industry's most influential creators.

In his essay on Daredevil, one of Marvel's leading superheroes, Tony Spanakos notes that Daredevil stories often seem to depict Daredevil's base of operation, the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of Manhattan, as a kind of Hobbesian state-of-nature governed by violence rather than politics. Spanakos argues, however, that Carl Schmitt's work on the crisis of parliamentary democracy provides a better framework for understanding Daredevil's world than the more familiar Hobbesian paradigm.

### *While there have been numerous female superheroes, Wonder Woman is arguably the most successful, both in terms of longevity and public awareness. But can she be described as a feminist?*

Worcester 2012, and Yockey 2012). This approach could be taken further, to explore not only how the narratives reflect contemporary political culture but how they constitute it. This approach is suggested by the important work of Murray Edelman (1996), and best developed in the superhero genre by political geographer Jason Dittmer (2009, 2013), but also in Costello (2010) and Lewis (2012).

As members of the discipline who have written on popular culture, we were frankly curious to find out what kind of response we would receive if we issued a general call for papers on politics and superheroes. After our request for papers went out, in the summer of 2012, roughly two-dozen potential contributors responded. While some of these responses came from specialists in other fields, such as literature and history, the majority came from within the discipline. Younger scholars seemed particularly intrigued by the prospect of contributing to a print symposium on the superhero genre.

From the outset, our ambition has been to put together a curated symposium that goes beyond the celebratory and the descriptive and that uses the concepts, theories, and tools of the discipline to assess the relationship between political ques-

While there have been numerous female superheroes, Wonder Woman is arguably the most successful, both in terms of longevity and public awareness. But can she be described as a feminist? Carolyn Cocca considers how the character has evolved from the 1940s to the early twenty-first century, arguing that Wonder Woman has “both enabled the reinscription of traditional articulations of gender as well as creating space for the production of new gender possibilities” (Cocca 2014).

Superhero comics often rely on what Mervi Miettinen describes as “masculine tropes such as vigilantism and patriotism” that celebrate “the hard and impenetrable male body” (Miettinen 2014). *Watchmen*, a landmark graphic novel from the mid-1980s, provided a sophisticated and self-aware deconstruction of superhero masculinity that has enjoyed a lasting impact on superhero comics.

While comic books featuring superheroes first turned up on newsstands in the late 1930s, the figure of the superhero can be traced back to the nineteenth century and the advent of mass-market “dime novels” and “penny dreadfuls.” The early superhero, according to Chris Gavalier, was in fact “a reflection of English nineteenth-century colonialism” that

“personified empire-authority.” This “imperial past,” he says, “continues to haunt the genre” (Gavaler 2014).

Protesters in post-handover Hong Kong regularly incorporate superhero imagery and rhetoric in their slogans, posters, and banners. Dan Garrett’s article considers the ways in which “foreign superheroes such as Batman and Iron Man” are used as “devices of visual mobilization, dissent, and counter-hegemonic resistance” (Garrett 2014) by new social movement actors in Hong Kong.

The contributors to this symposium mainly focus on superhero politics in the context of comic books and graphic novels. But the superhero genre represents an important resource for other media. The closing article, by Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison, unpacks the social allegories that are embedded in one of the most commercially successful movies ever released—*The Avengers* (2012). ■

#### NOTE

1. A Superman story from the mid-1970s portrayed Clark Kent as a loyal trade union member who readily joined his colleagues on the picket line. See Maggin (1974).

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