American Superheroes and the Politics of Good and Evil

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A nation needs heroes.

How to create a history

The United States of America is the Promised Land – for comics. Void of any ancient history or mythology of its own (Americans distanced themselves from Native American mythology by massacring the native tribes and dissolving their remains in the national melting pot), the nation has embraced and worshiped its comic superheroes.

Comic books originated in the United States in the late 1800s. However, it wasn’t until the 1930s that superheroes gained their popularity. It is not by chance, that they found an audience during a time of economic recession. Perhaps they were meant to intervene, if not as saviors of the economy, as saviors of all that is good, and guardians of a better future. Traditionally superheroes were based on characters from Ancient Greek legends and stories. For example, comic book hero Flash clearly borrows elements from the Greek god Hermes, even wearing a winged helmet, an icon of the god. Similarly, heroes such as Zeus, Thor and Beowulf have all been used as models for the creation of comic heroes. Others are a combination of legendary characters or archetypes. Any origin, they all have one thing in common: they always fight in the name of good, in the name of honest citizens, and they are always victorious.

If we were to place these superheroes somewhere on the political spectrum, they would most certainly lean to the right as they protect the traditional societal values based on a capitalist model.

The need for an ideological adversary

Superheroes of course have the necessary social compassion, but they are not terribly interested in fighting poverty. After all, many of them belong to the upper classes of society in their civilian lives: Batman as Bruce Wayne is a billionaire who owns practically the entire city; Iron Man as Tony Stark is a weapons’ magnate. Two other...
superheroes – Superman and Spiderman – work for tabloid newspapers. All are white collar, upper middle class, successful members of society.

Captain America is the ultimate symbol of American idealism. During the Cold War American superheroes fought against the evil Soviets and other “vermin” from the East, who always planned to take over the world. At the end of the Cold War, communist villains lost some popularity (although there still was the odd Communist villain lurking in some far off place who wanted to seize power and return the “old world order”), but eventually a new enemy appeared: the terrorist. Superheroes need super villains and super villains need a reason to want to destroy the world. They look more credible if they belong to an ideological camp. In this way, comic superheroes and their adversaries in many ways paralleled reality.

**Disrupting the superhero cliché from the other side of the Atlantic**

The mid 1950s – 1970s are commonly referred to as the Silver Age of comics. At this time, according to Peter Coogan, author of *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, “superhero comic books act[ed] to convey the prevailing social ideology.”

When this, however, no longer interested readers, the comic books “moved away from explicitly ideological texts. The superhero genre which had been used to build consensus and morale during WWII was now questioning America’s role as the world's superpower, due largely in part to the public’s perception of the Vietnam War.” Comic creators began to re-evaluate what good and evil really meant.

This was the case with British author Alan Moore who created a superhero story that defined this notion of ‘good’ that superheroes had been hiding behind all this time. Not only did he challenge the established ideas of good and evil, he also asked a question that was ubiquitous to traditional comics: is there a greater good? And if so, is it superior to an average, everyday good? Moore illustrated his answers to these questions in his comic series *Watchmen*. Taking place during the Cold War, a fake attack on New York City (by aliens from outer space) leads to global peace, as the two sides of the Iron Curtain unite in a fight against their common extraterrestrial adversary. In this series, Moore critiques the traditional superhero concept.

Moore is also the author of the series *V for Vendetta*, in which he creates a dystopian exaggeration of strictly right wing politics. He creates a quasi-Fascist system, full of CCTV cameras and manipulated media, where political leaders create artificial fear of “the other” among its population. In this comic, the superhero is a left wing anarchist who is not scared to face the establishment and point out that the ruling elites are the real evil.

This represents a turning point for heroes. They were “further revolutionized” when leading characters had some kind of “weakness or defect, such as the Hulk and Spiderman,” explains Coogan in his book. “They were persecuted and misunderstood outsiders and spoke directly to public disorientation.” As times have changed, the definition of what it means to be a superhero, and a villain, has dramatically changed as well.

**Underground comix**

Left wing comics began to take off in the 1960s thanks to the underground movement. Underground comics were more or less a reaction to the ethical codex of the Comics Code Authority (CCA) which was established in the 1950s to cleanse comics from anything that could harm children’s development (children were found to constitute the largest readership of this media).
Scary creatures disappeared, violence was hidden in between the graphic panels and the superhero language was cleaned up as well. The desire to breach this codex gave rise to comics intended for adult audiences.

An entirely underground scene appeared, dealing with problems of regular people. The heroes of the comics were often the authors themselves. The storylines reflected the ideas and realities of the counterculture of the time. Some of the most important authors in this movement were Robert Crumb, Kim Deitch, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar. The underground comic book scene is often referred to as comix.

Just your average everyday superhero

One of the most interesting left wing comic books is the Love and Rockets series, or rather its subseries Locas, written and illustrated by Jaime Hernandez (His brother Gilbert is the author of the second subseries called Palomar). Published for the first time in the 1980s – in the conservative years of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan – it was created in a time when economies prospered, militaries militarized and the fall of the Iron Curtain was just around the corner. The market solved everything and people seemed almost redundant.

The first series, Maggie the Mechanic, tells the story of an 18-year-old girl who lives in a Hispanic suburb of California. Hernandez works with the sci-fi genre allowing the characters to live in a world split between the fantastic and the mundane of ordinary life situations. Maggie has normal issues and struggles with her job, friends, and relationships. She and her friend (and sometimes lover) Hopey are active in the punk movement, do not work too hard, and are struggling to find happiness. As the series progresses Hernandez loses the sci-fi elements and further develops Maggie as well as her friends. His heroines get older, fatter and lazier. In the Ghost of Hoppers series Maggie is going on 40 and her carefree past is just a distant memory. Still, at every age, Maggie represents a new kind of superhero because she prevails in her struggles and hardships of everyday life.

May good prevail

As much as the political leanings of traditional superheroes are hidden within the comics, it is obvious which side of the political spectrum they prefer. Characters in left wing comix are more forward with their opinions. While traditional superheroes try to protect the values of society as it is, new superheroes try to determine and define their existence within a society in which they do not agree. Either way, they have taken on an important role in American society. They reflect and commentate on current happenings and illustrate unique views of the world – where good (however it is defined) still always prevails.

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