Reimagining a Genre: Comic Book Superheroes as Political Commentary

Daniel Miller, Class of 2013
New College House
November 11, 2012

Dan Miller is from Womelsdorf, Pennsylvania. He majored in psychology at F&M while also serving as the president of Psi Chi and working as an HA and Orientation Planning Director for The New College House. Dan plans to pursue a career in federal service.
I am not a comic book nerd. Growing up Quaker I was not allowed to read comic books due to their graphic depiction of violence. As a result, the first comic book that I read was during my senior year of high school, it was Frank Miller’s The Dark Knight Returns. I expected to find a campy montage of men in tights roaming the streets brutally beating petty thieves, instead what I found was a dark and engrossing story that questioned the nature of good and evil as well as the very existence of a political system. In this book Miller argues that the government is an inept bureaucracy that will inevitably lead the country to its own destruction, and that the only faire form of governance is anarchy (Miller, 1986). While I disagree with both his assessment of human nature and the right way to govern, I found in this book a new medium for engaging in political discourse. From The Dark Knight I ventured into the world of Marvel comics where I found the X-Men. At this point in the X-Men story line, the mutant community had just gone through genocide at the hands of an out of control government sentinel robot (Hine, 2001). I was shocked at the graphic depiction of death, and the raw emotion that was conveyed by the art. These were not the childish picture books that I had always viewed comics as being. Rather, these books were dealing with adult content, political ideology, and social justice three things sure to resonate with any politically engaged 18 year old male. Which brings us to the point of this essay; in this essay I will present to you the case for comic books, and more specifically the superheroes in them as political commentary. I will argue that comics have evolved from their simplistic roots as propaganda to where they serve now as critical analysis of current issues. Lastly, I will argue that using cultural heroes as political commentary is not a new phenomenon.

The clearest interaction between superheroes and politics is in the way in which superheroes engage with US presidents. Presidents have a history of appearing in comic books often in comical ways. In Superman #170 Superman is called to the White House by President Kennedy and issued with the mission of supporting Kennedy’s physical fitness program to turn “weakling” Americans into strong Americans (Bridwell, Finger, & Siegel, 1964). He is then depicted in a training montage a la Rocky, whipping the lazy American public into shape. Superman again demonstrates his personal relationship with the Presidents in 1978 when he meets Presidents Ford and Carter at his intergalactic bout with World Heavy Weight Champion Muhammad Ali (Adams & O’Neil, 1978). While these examples are humorous the relationship between comics and sitting presidents has had it darker moments. After Superman dies fighting Doomsday both Clintons are in attendance and speak at the funeral. In Ultimate X-Men #6 President Bush is attacked by the mutant villain Magneto who strips the president naked and forces him to lick his boots on national TV before attempting to kill the president (Millar, 2001). This shift from jovial to somber and somewhat disturbing depictions of American presidents is one example of how the relationship between superheroes and politics has changed through history growing from its patriotic roots to a more nuanced and often critical reflection of the government.

No superhero embodies the propagandistic nature of comics during WWII better than Captain America. The very first issue of Captain America features the iconic cover art in which Captain America in all of his star spangled glory socks Hitler is the kisser (Herron, 1941). At his inception Steve Rogers as Captain America was the symbol of American values. The product of American scientific ingenuity, Captain America was made into a super soldier through the use of a super serum. This serum turned frail Steve Rogers into the star spangled avenger. Throughout the 1940s Captain America fought the Axis powers all over the world, using not a gun but his
shield suggesting that aggression should not be the modus operandi but rather one should defend one's nation and values. Similarly, in the golden age of comics no superhero represented American values better than Superman.

When Superman first appeared in the pages of Action Comics in 1938 he immediately became a symbol for good, and therefore America (Siegel & Shuster, 1938). Upon realizing that he possessed great power the teen age Clark Kent decides that, “. . . he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind, and so was created Superman, champion of the oppressed. . .who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!” What makes Superman a symbol of American values is that his upbringing in rural America gave him such moral fortitude that even though he is given nearly unlimited power he understands that with great power comes great responsibility and that he must use this power for good. In Superman’s first appearance he saves a falsely accused woman from death row, defends a battered woman from her abusive husband, saves Lois Lane from the mob, and fights corruption in the Senate. These acts show us exactly what Superman stands for, “Truth, justice, and the American way.” Like no other superhero in the DC universe Superman becomes an agent of the US government often appearing as both the president’s right hand man and lap dog. Given their origin stories few people would question the patriotism of either Captain America or Superman, except for maybe the heroes themselves.

In 1973 while President Richard Nixon defended himself during the Watergate scandal, Captain America was fighting a secret organization bent on world domination (English, 1974). The story concludes with the revelation that the evil mastermind behind this plot was the president of the United States. Captain America is crushed; the government that he has always represented was being led by an evil mastermind. Captain question, “So when people take a look at me, which America am I supposed to symbolize?” He is so distraught that he ultimately abandons the mantel of Captain America and tosses his shield into a river. We see in this issue how the zeitgeist of the Watergate scandal inspired the writers of Captain America to question patriotism, trust in government, and the role of a citizen. Rogers has seen that individuals can manipulate the American government and make it a tool for evil, and he refuses to be a part of such a system. For the next two years there is no Captain America, instead Rogers takes up the mantel of the Nomad. Eventually though Captain America returns, but not as a symbol of propaganda or as a government soldier but as an individual fighting to support the American people and the American dream even when supporting those ideals brings him into direct conflict with the very government he swore allegiance to. Superman goes through a similar experience in the landmark Action Comics issue 900.

Issue 900 has become infamous for its depiction of the long time symbol of America questioning his patriotism. In this issue Superman flies to Iran to stand with protesters in a nonviolent show of civil disobedience (Dini et al., 2011). Fearing the long time symbol of American might, Iran interprets Superman’s presence as a declaration of war from the US. Understandably, the government is ticked off, and the CIA asks Superman to cease and desist. In response the man from Smallville, Kansas who has always stood for “truth, justice, and the American way” responds that he will be renouncing his citizenship in front of the UN. Furthermore, he abandons his longtime catch phrase as well stating that “truth, justice, and the American way is no longer enough” and that the world is too small for Superman to only
represent the US, instead he will become a citizen of the Universe fighting for all people not one nation.

I have presented two cases in which the writers of comic books have used iconic superheroes as tools of political commentary. Inspired by the political events of the times the writers felt that the superheroes were uniquely equipped to make a stand. These two heroes attempted to shift the definition of patriotism; during the Marvel event Civil War Captain America explains to Spiderman why he believes that he is right in fighting the US government, “Doesn't matter what the press says. Doesn't matter what the politicians or the mobs say. Doesn't matter if the whole country decides that something wrong is something right (Millar, 2006). This nation was founded on one principle above all else: the requirement that we stand up for what we believe, no matter the odds or the consequences. When the mob and the press and the whole world tell you to move, your job is to plant yourself like a tree beside the river of truth, and tell the whole world, “No you move.”

What Captain America is suggesting is that it is patriotic to stand up for what we believe in. It is often difficult to stand up for what we believe in especially when it involves questioning our values, what we do in the name of peace and freedom, or when it leads to breaking the law. When pacifists were told that it was the law that they needed to fight during WWI even though it went against their moral and religious beliefs they were imprisoned when they refused to serve, not every person is ready to make this sacrifice for what they believe in. When we lack the courage or the ability to stand up for our values Superheroes can fill that void they can act as proxies for us and in doing so they become a mirror, a mirror that reflects to us how and why to stand up. That is exactly what Superman and Captain America are doing when they question their devotion to the US Government. This idea of standing up for what you believe in and resistance leads to the events of Marvel’s Civil War which pits Tony Stark and the US government against Captain America and outlawed vigilante superheroes.

In the Marvel Civil War story arc the US government bans superheroes following a tragic event in Stamford Connecticut. A group of amateur crime fighters are filming a reality TV show about their efforts when a crazed villain they are pursuing blows up a local school killing many of the would be heroes as well as the people in the school. Driven by guilt Tony Stark (Iron Man) supports the government ban on superheroes and heads up a new initiative that would have all superheroes reveal their identities and powers. To enforce the act Stark builds a prison for the heroes. Heroes that resist are caught using an aggressive fire first ask questions later approach and imprisoned without trial. This conflict divides the superhero community pitting Tony Stark against Steve Rogers as the pro registration heroes fight the anti-registration heroes. Marvel’s writers are using the superheroes and their civil war as a mirror. Reflected to the readers are the moral dilemmas surrounding the patriot act, Guantanamo bay, and the heavy handed tactics of the Bush administration.

Published in 2006, this story focuses on three key issues, the loss of civil liberties in the name of increased security, the detention and trial of captured combatants, and how to fight people who don’t respect the rule of law. Luke Cage, an African American superhero compares the act to Jim Crow laws and that enforcing the law based solely on it being a law is like enforcing a law that support slavery. Spiderman questions whether it is right to take away peoples freedom of privacy to both regulate their powers and to fight a resistance movement (Straczyn, 2007). While some allied nations like Canada and England support the act, passing
versions of their own, France and the nations ruled by persons with superpowers (Atlantis and Wakanda) resist the movement fearing that government regulation of superheroes will turn them into super soldiers. Following the passage of the law we see Stark use illegal surveillance to learn the identity of superheroes and their weaknesses, Stark mercilessly pursues heroes and apprehends them often in brutal ways, heroes are detained in a hellish prison without trial, and heroes lose family members to violence towards ousted heroes.

In the fall out of the registration act the human torch is beaten into a coma by a mob of angry civilians, Peter Parkers aunt may is assassinated, heroes on both sides are killed, and many civilians lose their lives to the fighting (Straczyn, 2007). Ultimately what ends the conflict is the cost of civilian lives. Like never before in comic books the Civil War series continually draws the reader’s attention to the imminent danger that civilians are put in when superheroes and villains square off in the middle of a city. Seeing this cost, Captain America surrenders to Tony Stark only to be assassinated on the steps of a court house. With the death of Captain America Stark’s dissent into depression and alcoholism is complete, he is crushed by a conflict in which he battered and killed his friends, ultimately the series ends with Stark lamenting, “It wasn’t worth it.” Using heroes to explore political institutions and values is not a new phenomenon.

Just as Captain America questions the morality of the Registration Act, in the Homeric epic the Iliad Achilles questions the value of supporting the warrior code (Lattimore & Martin, 2011). Disillusioned with the political structure and no longer believing in the reciprocal nature of the Achaean army Achilles refuses to fight the Trojans. What unfolds is a chaotic battle where heroes on both sides square off with not only one another but even Gods. Achilles no longer believes that his comrades will honor him if he dies thus breaking the reciprocal bond in the Achaean army. Warriors fight for honor in life and glory in death, if you do not receive a proper burial than you cannot receive glory. If Achilles does not believe that his allies will retrieve his dead body than there is nothing to be gained in fighting. Additionally, Achilles feels slighted that he is not considered the best of the Acheans even though he is the best fighter, instead he is insulted by the real leader Agamemnon who rules through fear, intimidation, and power. Therefore Achilles decides to prove his superiority by allowing his allies to be killed in droves while he stands idly by. This use of a cultural hero to question the value of what appears to be a petty war is not unlike comic book writers using superheroes to question the value of a law that asks citizens to give up their civil liberties. Ultimately, the epic concludes with Achilles returning to humanity and allowing the Trojans to honor the dead hero Hector before the Acheans sack the city of Troy. Homer includes the funeral songs of three women speaking about Hector, the most moving of which is the song of Hectors wife Andromoche.

Andromoches sings of her husband’s short and tragic life, noting that now that the greatest defender of Tory has fallen so too will the city. She laments most of all that she was robbed of the opportunity to share one last intimate moment with Hector before he perished. The pursuit of a glorious warriors death meant that she could not have that cherished last moment with Hector, and she laments this more than the immanent fall of Troy. Homer is clearly drawing attention to the cost of war. He is in no way calling for pacifism, Homer values the warriors place in society, but he also wants to recognize that war has a cost. This point is furthered by the fact that Achilles recognizes that the only way to break the cycle of vengeance that comes from the deaths of Patroclus and Hector is to give Hectors body back to his father Priam. We see in this epic the
use of many cultural heroes Gods, Greeks, and Trojans to question the cost and value of war, the relationship between mortals and immortals, and the pursuit of immortality.

Now we get to the crux of the issue, why use cultural heroes or superheroes to engage in political commentary? There are plenty of overtly political comic books. Art Spiegelman’s Maus follows the story of his parents throughout the Holocaust. Persepolis examines the Iranian revolution through the eyes of a young girl. If comics can be overly political and commercially successful than why use superheroes as political commentary? I believe that there are three reasons that superheroes work as political commentary, they have our attention, they have plausible deniability, and we want them to. We love our superheroes, in recent years superhero movies have made a killing at the box office. We accept that superheroes engage in political commentary because we love them. If I love Spiderman and I see his personal turmoil that results from the loss of his civil liberties than I might think critically about protecting my own rights. In the 1950’s the radio program The Adventures of Superman aired a series called The Clan of the Burning Cross where Superman took on the KKK (Siegel & Shuster, 1946). This program was a fantastic success and stifled KKK recruiting. One of the anecdotal stories that came out of this event was a KKK leader who came home to find his son dressed as Superman fighting a friend dressed as the evil clan. This boy loves Superman and therefore believes that what Superman does is right. In a way the writers of comic books have an obligation to their audience to make their characters do good, even when doing good means questioning the government or patriotism.

The second factor that makes superheroes great political commentary is their plausible deniability. Comic books are absurd; they are violent, fantastical, and unrealistic. These same qualities make them perfect for engaging with ideas though. When Magneto attacks Washington and assaults the president he can do this without getting slammed by the press or the White House because it is completely absurd. There is no chance that this event could ever happen, there is no mutant menace. Whenever comics push the boundaries of what is acceptable commentary they can point out their own farcical nature. What could be more absurd than taking comics literally, and therefore any attack on a president is acceptable because it is not a literal threat. All of this amounts to free reign to deal with controversial issues in fantastical ways that are often overly dramatic and violent. This same absurdity is also part of what makes comic books a great medium. There is something fascinating about the ridiculous storylines, how could anybody not be entertained by the thought of Superman fighting Muhammad Ali in space while Lucile Ball, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter cheer them on…in space! Similarly, Jon Stuart and Steven Colbert can get away making political statements that others cannot get away with, because they are presenting their commentary as comedy. There is truth to what they say, but they gain more leniency in what they can say, by the way in which they present it.

The last reason that superheroes engage in political commentary is because we want them to. Homer depicts Achilles as questioning the warrior code not because it is funny or a good literary device but because it is a question worth asking, a question that may not be acceptable or respected if it was just a query posed by Homer. When the questioning comes from a superhero like Achilles, god like Achilles, swift footed Achilles, Achilles has the power and the respect to get away with such a questioning of values. The lowly Thersites on the other hand lacks the respect or power to ask similar questions and is beaten down, literally and figuratively, as a result. Similarly Captain America is given the same leniency. When Captain America, Captain
America the man who punched Hitler who defeated the Axis powers, questions the actions of the US government then readers take note. We ask our heroes to be political when we can’t, when questioning is not acceptable or popular. The Marvel civil war ends with an important image. Captain America is not defeated by Iron Man, he is not stopped by any super hero or villain, he is stopped by a bunch of ordinary people. This is a group of people who saw something that they didn’t agree with and decided to stand up for their beliefs and challenge a man who could easily defeat them all. What comic books do when they engage in politics is present a case. They present the case that the power ultimately lies in the people’s hands. Our heroes will pave the way by bringing ideas to our attention, the heroes talk about the issues fight a few bad guys and then life goes on, but they also challenge us. They challenge us to also engage in these ideas. On paper the ideas are irrelevant, but in real life the ideas affect us and we Americans living in the democracy that Captain America and Superman fight for, have the power, the super power to change the things that we disagree with.
References


Comic Book Superheroes as Political Commentary