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## SYMPOSIUM

# Why they won't save us: Political dispositions in the conflicts of superheroes

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[0.1] Abstract—Comic book superheroes tend to be conservative and their opponents progressive. Here I explore the reasons for heroic conservatism, review recent disruptions to the trend, and consider what superhuman politics can tell us about our own transhuman and science fictional conditions.

[0.2] Keywords—Comics; Conservatism; Politics

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## 1. Conservative heroes

[1.1] Why won't superheroes save us? The people of Gotham or Metropolis should wonder. After nearly a century of superhero comics, humans remain largely unsaved within these fictional worlds. They should be asking their saviors why their worlds are still so dangerous, chaotic, even hellish.

[1.2] Yet superheroes do work for justice. Bond Benton and Daniela Peterka-Benton (2013) make it clear that we cannot discount the good that the heroes do to work toward an end to social ills. Superman's early opposition to domestic violence (1938) and opposition to the Ku Klux Klan (in a 1947 radio play) are evidence that even from the start, superheroes are interested in making the world better. But domestic violence still exists in Superman's world and likely always will. Racism still exists there, as here. Human trafficking continues. One way to read the contradiction is to simply acknowledge that "comic book readers long for utopia-in-progress rather than utopia achieved" (Wolf-Meyer 2003, 510), and that for the sake of drama, story, and sales, real-world problems cannot be ultimately solved in fictional worlds without robbing fictional worlds of all conflict and credibility. But removing considerations of metafiction and questions about our real world's relationship to fictional worlds, the problem remains that in these worlds, heroes do allow serious problems to persist—problems that seem solvable by those with superpowers.

[1.3] Superheroes are conservative. We must be careful with our terms here. Surely we can roll out many examples of comic book superheroes being liberal. After all, superheroes have supported feminism, civil rights, gay marriage, and many other socially liberal causes. Beginning in the 1970s, we even see "a shift in comic-book content from oblique narrative metaphors for social problems toward direct representations of racism and sexism, urban blight, and political corruption" (Fawaz 2011, 356). Our heroes stand for protecting the weak and giving agency to the powerless. So here I don't mean to say that superheroes exist on one end of a conservative/liberal spectrum, but rather that they live on the conservative end of a progressive spectrum.

[1.4] Conservatism in this sense means conserving what is good. "Politically, philosophical conservatives are cautious in tampering with forms of political behavior and institutions and they are especially skeptical of whole scale reforms" (Fieser n.d.). For conservatives, a first focus is on the good in a given state as it currently exists. We can almost imagine Edmund Burke (1791) speaking directly to posthuman or superhuman concerns with the following words:

[1.5] Each contract of each particular state is but a clause in the great primeval contract of eternal society, linking the lower with the higher natures, connecting the visible and invisible world, according to a fixed compact sanctioned by the inviolable oath which holds all physical and all moral natures, each in their appointed place. This law is not subject to the will of those who by an obligation above them, and infinitely superior, are bound to submit their will to that law. (144)

[1.6] If Burke (1791) is correct in defining society as a natural contract between the past, the present, and those who might live in the future, then it would seem that the disruption of such a contract pits the disruptor against the very laws of an inherited cosmic order. Even superheroes don't want that kind of drama. There is, then, hardly a better way to understand the lack of action of superheroes when it comes to large-scale, permanent, and global changes in their fictional worlds. The X-Men have the power to put down corrupt rulers of human societies, from Western presidents to Eastern sheikhs. Superman could destroy our planet and therefore obviously has the power to save the whales or end human trafficking. Yet dictatorships, slavery, environmental degradation, and civil disenfranchisement persist in the worlds of superheroes. Benton (2013) points out that although Superman fights for the American way, he is fact an (undocumented) alien. Indeed, the fact of his failure to use his godlike powers to make a structurally or permanently better world suggests such a deep and aberrant conservatism that we are forced into the permanent remembrance of his essential alienness.

[1.7] Consider Grant Morrison's take on the reaction of Marvel heroes to the attacks of September 11, 2001, as an example. We see "the superheroes aimlessly assembled at Ground Zero. They were compelled to acknowledge the event as if it had occurred in their own simulated universe, but they hadn't been there to prevent it, which negated their entire *raison d'être*. If al-Qaeda could do to Marvel Universe New York what Doctor Doom, Magneto, and Kang the Conqueror had failed to do, surely that meant the Marvel heroes were ineffectual" (2012, 346–47).

[1.8] Morrison is making a point about the role of heroes in popular culture and about their stories' relevance to the reader's experience of the world: "September 11 was the biggest challenge yet to the relevance of superhero comics" (2012, 347). However, the bigger lesson is perfectly obvious. Superheroes have the powers to stop terror attacks, but they did not stop 9/11. It is almost as if reality had inserted itself into these fictional worlds as a Situationist *détournement*, twisting the spectacle of the in-world reality into a commentary on its absurdities. Within their worlds, superheroes had the power to stop the invasion of Iraq by the United States, but instead they allowed it; they had the power to put Saddam Hussein in a prison or end the US sanctions against Iraq in the 1990s that caused hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children to starve to death, but they did not. Imagine what Marvel's Cyclops could do in 10 minutes to a naval blockade, especially with support from a few of his friends. Superheroes could end the genocide in Darfur or starvation in Yemen. They could stop corporate militias from terrorizing anti-oil activists in Nigeria for good. Their versions of the war in Vietnam could have been over in a day. Yet they allow much evil to endure. Why?