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Symposium

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

Woody Evans

Zayed University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

[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

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?

[1.9]   Superheroes may be understood as deeply (even pathologically) small-c

conservative; although they are gods among men, they do not cause large-scale disruptions to human institutions, even when those institutions are widely considered to be unjust or even evil. Those we call supervillains, however, do.

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2. Progressive villains

[2.1]   Supervillains can be understood to be progressive in the sense that they wish to push an agenda that is more likely to fundamentally reorder society—but usually in some formulation that ends with said supervillain at the top. Some of them push progress for good reasons, but good intentions often lead to, as is popularly said, "by any means necessary," and disaster is a usual consequence (which is when the superheroes get cued).

[2.2]   Progressivism, if we are to use it on a spectrum as the other end of a more static conservatism, arises from the observation that big problems exist and that "something needs to be done" (Nugent 2009, 3). In American political history, examples of various progressivisms abound. The progressives of Colorado railed against unfair treatment of workers and the deceit of political party bosses (Laugen 2010). In Jim Crow–era Alabama, progressives focused on "good government, white supremacy, and honest elections" (Hackney 2010, 231). By the 1920s, Coloradan progressives would also be split by the increasing influence of the Ku Klux Klan (Laugen 2010). In Alabama, progressives who wanted to overturn crooked politicians and to help the rural farm economies allied themselves with poor whites afraid of empowered blacks; ironically, poor whites may have lost more voters than did blacks because of progressive poll taxes and literacy tests (Hackney 210; Feldman 2004).

[2.3]   However, progressivism was also a force for truly positive social change. The muckraking journalists called attention to slum conditions, dangerous work, disease, and misery of all kinds—with some successes at cleaning things up (Nellie Bly's exposé of a New York asylum comes to mind). Changing ill aspects of society for the common good at the expense of special interests is the main concern of progressivism at its best.

[2.4]   Supervillains have, at their most audacious, been concerned with exactly that: upending a miserable world for a higher purpose, a greater good, and shared prosperity. To be fair, progressivism is not usually understood to be as radical a political force as would be represented by scheming supervillains. In our world, progressivism is about progress through reform rather than revolution;

the work of the Chicago School sociologists demonstrates a progressive agenda pursued with all the attention to reason and methodology necessary in science (Fitzpatrick 1994). However, its ethos of fostering changes that could be relatively radical, even if arrived at through slow and methodical means, is surely reflected in some of the greatest conflicts between supervillains and their antagonists—only supervillains don't often do either gradual or reform. In the Marvel universe, the High Evolutionary provides a good example in his attempt to alter life on Earth with his Evolution Bomb in "The Evolution War" story arc of 1988. Marvel's online wiki summarizes the story: "The High Evolutionary intends to help humanity reach the next stage of its evolution, regardless of the consequences, and embarks on a series of plans to attain his goal" ("Evolutionary War" 2013). The Evolutionary Bomb would have ended human life on Earth as we know it and would have mutated or evolved all humans into what the High Evolutionary intended as a higher state of being. This would have been very radical progress in a short time, had the Avengers not stopped him. The High Evolutionary saw his intentions as good because he wanted to ready the people of Earth to face the threat of the Beyonders. However, to bring on such sudden and drastic changes without the permission of humans themselves is certainly unethical.

[2.5]   Consider Grant Morrison's treatment of DC's Lex Luthor. In Morrison's *All Star Superman* (2011), Luthor is undeniably a bad guy who wants to rule the world. He summarizes his struggle with Superman very simply: "If it wasn't for Superman, I'd be in charge on this planet!" (124). But there is another element to Luthor's opposition to the superhero, and it's a progressivist one. Luthor is transforming his prison into "a new model of society…a blueprint for utopian living!" and his fellow inmates "can feel the coming of a change, the wings of a new human renaissance" to come with the destruction of Superman (113). Superman is "an alien invader" that Luthor refuses to kneel to (118). This resistance to a powerful invader and the reforming and revolutionary strain in Luthor is also expressed at his final defeat by Superman. "I saw how to save the world!" Luthor says. "I could have made everyone see. I could have saved the world if it wasn't for you!" (288). Superman replies, "You could have saved the world years ago if it mattered to you, Luthor" (288).

[2.6]   Is Superman accusing himself there too? Surely saving the world is supposed to matter to Superman, and Superman is demonstrably (ad infinitum) more powerful, able, and goodwilled than Luthor; indeed, Superman levies this

criticism of Luthor after punching him out and winning the day. So Superman saved the world, maybe, from Luthor, just like he had so many times before. Are we really meant to believe that after a good rest, a hot bath, and a stroll in Central Park with Lois (or a leisurely flight with her above it), Superman couldn't, starting as soon as tomorrow, save the world for good?

[2.7]   This pattern repeats. Magneto has noble intentions at times, such as protecting mutants from the bigotry and violence of humans. Alan Moore's Ozymandias (*Watchmen,* 1987) is another progressive villain. The horror he brings down on innocent civilians is meant to bring about a greater peace and to keep the cold war from ever getting hot. Again and again, supervillains threaten to totally upset and upend the world as we know it in their efforts to improve it. Perhaps progressive motives move their hearts but become warped by their twisted minds.

3. We are not like them

[3.1]   Superheroes are exasperating. Why don't they just fix everything? Why won't they save us from our worst and most chronic ills? Why don't they effect permanent changes for the better and remake the world as a utopia? Of many possible answers, we've seen two that are closely related. First, superheroes are conservative. They let the normal, worldly affairs of folks click on just as they always have—even the bad stuff. Second, if they did try to reshape our world into an eternal utopia, they wouldn't be superheroes; they would be supervillains. Remaking the world is the work of the progressive, and sometimes well-meaning, superbaddie.

[3.2]   The genre has matured, and superhero navel-gazing, particularly about civil and geopolitical concerns, should perhaps be expected after *Watchmen* (1987) and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) (Dubose 2007). A generation later, an outright concern exists within superhero comics over this very question of making the world a better place, or as Warren Ellis (1999) expresses it in *The Authority,* creating "a better world." The Authority is explicitly concerned with these pedestrian horrors at first. They want to make a better world—a world without hunger or tyranny—but they get distracted. Sadly, "in the degree of danger that is posed to the Earth, quickly escalating to cosmic proportions, there is clearly no time for earthly political concerns" (Wolf-Meyer 2003, 509). These extremely progressive superheroes who really do want a finer

world for all…well, they just don't get around to it. In Ellis's *Planetary* (1998–2009), it should be noted, there is a reversal of roles and an exception to this rule. The good guys are fighting hard to win world-changing technology from conservative and despotic supervillains. Spoiler warning: the story ends with the progressive heroes finally positioned to create a finer world. The superheroes (if we can call them that) of the Planetary Organization win, and their story is over: they do the right thing by the rest of us, and once the bad guys are dusted, they set to making a better world. Contrast these heroes with traditional superheroes in "continuing corporate stories" who can "never cause lasting political change" or "effect lasting popular change of any sort" (Darius 2013).

[3.3]   As our own world moves steadily into increasing technological wonder, sweeping the diseased and impoverished along into better days, we should reflect on the progressivism and conservatism of our heroes and their enemies. Even as we become our own heroes through the advanced technologies that so inspire transhumanists and technoprogressives, we might wonder which tendency will guide us: to conserve the good (while risking continued evil) or to push for the better (even if our means are imperfect). We have no dramatic tension preventing us from saving ourselves and progressing into finer worlds to come. Neither are we beholden to any Burkean cosmic orders that may prevent us from rewriting ourselves or our experience of the universe for the good of all. Like John Byrne's She-Hulk or Grant Morrison's Animal Man, we may soon find that authorization is a natural effect of the realization of our own powers (Kripal 2011). In so doing, it will be vital to remain vigilant in the examination of our own intentions.

4. Acknowledgments

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