Superhero Comics: Artifacts of the U.S. Experience

Dr. Julian C. Chambliss

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Julian Chambliss is Associate Professor of History at Rollins College.

In the last two decades, comic books and comic book heroes have experienced increased scholarly interest. This attention has approached comic books and characters as myth, sought context of the superhero archetype, and used comic books as cultural markers for postwar America. What all of these efforts share is an acknowledgement that comic books and superheroes offer a distinct means to understand U. S. culture.[1] The place of comic books in contemporary discussion of the American experience has been seen as space linked to popular culture. The comic book genre, especially its most popular aspect, the superhero, uses visual cues to reduce individual characters into representations of cultural ideas. This process has allowed characters to become powerful representations of nationalism (Superman), or the search for societal stability (Batman), or struggles over femininity (Wonder Woman). Scholars have established the importance of heroic characterization as a means to inform societal members about collective expectations and behavioral ideas.[2]

In many ways, the use of comics in the classroom has become standardized over the last few years as teachers have discovered the medium's ability to engage students. Indeed, academic conferences like this one have grown in number as scholars have rediscovered what we all know: kids who read comics tend to go on and read other material.[3] Perhaps the most visible and lauded use of comics is in the History classroom, following the pattern established with the successful integration of comics focused on war and politics, found notably in *Maus* by Art Spiegelman and, more recently, in *Alan's War: The Memories of G.I. Alan Cope* by Emmanuel Guibert.[4] In both cases, the comic narratives are biographical efforts. In *Maus*, Spiegelman draws on interviews with his father and in *Alan's War*, Guibert interprets Cope's memories of World War II.

As such, these efforts correspond to other primary sources that are used to bring into focus the voice of people or groups directly involved with historical events. A more complex use of the comic book involves the broader study of American culture. In this context, historians use comic books as a primary source that reflect some aspect of the time and place that produced them.[5] In this regard, Professor M. Thomas Inge established comics as a mass medium in the United States singular in its broad cultural appeal. Inge's analysis of comic art in the United States is noteworthy for his clear assertions that the comics we know today are "a distinctively American art form that contributed heavily to the culture of the world, from Picasso to the pop art movement."[6]

Inge's justification of the uniqueness of the comic art form seems excessive, given the spread of the comic medium in classrooms across the country. Yet, I think it is appropriate to return to his justification when considering the superhero genre. As I have noted in the past, the "graphic novel" is a linked singular artistic narrative, projects in form and function seen as literary endeavors.[7] In contrast, superhero comics are linked to immaturity. Even as the comic medium has grown to encompass every literary genre, the superhero remains dogged by a marginal status rooted in their mass-market origins. Defined as cheap distraction for the poor masses in the 1940s, they were blamed for juvenile delinquency in the 1950s. These concerns, however, fail to understand the depth of the cultural context linked to the superhero. As Peter Coogan explains in *Superhero: The Secret Origins of a Genre*, the superhero acts as an orienting figure that "resolves basic cultural conflicts and contradictions."[8] Coogan argues mission, powers, identity, and costume are the traits that define a superhero.[9] The superhero's mission is pro-social and selfless. The superhero has powers beyond normal standards. The superhero has a secret identity. Finally, the superhero has a costume that symbolizes heroic identity.

Despite the marginalizing social commentary linked to the superhero, the genre serves as an important artifact of the modern American experience. As Robert Salkowitz, the author of *Comic-Con and the Business of Pop Culture* explains, comics offer an intergenerational dialogue between creators and readers that lays bare changing societal concerns.[10] While we can make this argument about many art forms, the superhero comic is unique in its reliance on a shared narrative universe with continuity. While we can and do expected media to change, superhero comics are blessed or cursed with the need to relate events and people within the story to an audience that is changing. Thus, other comic genres may vary, but superheroes comics have an established convention that allows the reader to identify with characters and their internal narrative history. The resulting structure creates strong reader loyalty, but it also requires the creators to fashion stories that must both relate internally according to logic and externally to a shifting audience. Indeed, the current emphasis on superheroes as fuel for media convergence highlights the medium's reflective power and cultural influence beyond the confines of pop culture. At the same time, for historical analysis, the superhero's diverse origins and narrative universe offer the opportunity to better understand identity, culture, and power in American society.

Simultaneously influencing our perceptions and shaping collective experience, the superhero highlights dynamic forces shaping the social, political, and economic circumstances. From a pedagogical perspective, superhero comics represent a unique opportunity to engage students through both analysis of content and context. Comics then elicit active participation and cognitive engagement with material with wide cultural accessibility. The comic form blends the experience of seeing an image and reading text to create the narrative experience, yet the content must and does make every effort to link to the audience. The structure of the superhero comic offers the opportunity to examine United States history on multiple

levels, but for the sake of this presentation I want to demonstrate two examples using comic book characters and related media. These examples offer an opportunity to explore nationalism and identity using superhero comics and related media.

In a recent article in the journal *Race & Class*, the link between imagining future and contemporary conflicts was made clear. According to Matt Carr, the creation of a new brand of military futurism is shaping the development of military policy in the United States and the United Kingdom. In an effort to "think the unthinkable," military planners have attempted to bridge the gap between the imagined threats of the future and contemporary challenges. The result is this imagined future landscape, which provides justification of "endless global war against enemies" that may or may not exist. The reality is that the idea of contextualized fears through futurist scenarios has a long history in the United States. These ideas can be associated with official public documents, but also with media. Within the superhero comic context, Iron Man offers a special exploration of a major historical question, the ways and means Americans dealt with the complications of the Cold War.[11]

Stan Lee's exploration of the Cold War through the character Tony Stark/Iron Man, however, stands out as a noteworthy exception to the adolescent angst associated with Marvel characters. The first appearance of the Invincible Iron Man in 1963 introduced a telling narrative on the importance of the military-industrial complex to the American experience in the midst of the Cold War. If, as military historian Victor Hanson explains, "War reflects culture," then depictions of warfare offer an important tool to understand American thinking about conflict. In superhero comics, Tony Stark/Iron Man offers a continuously updated view of American negotiation between technology, ideology, and corporatism related to national defense.[12] Iron Man provides a ready-made vehicle to explore multiple issues related to Cold War foreign and domestic politics in the 1960s, but the character's contemporary use in the Marvel films allows us to see the evolution of those same ideas within the current global war on terror.

Stan Lee created Iron Man with the intention of combining classic Arthurian themes with modern science fiction. Iron Man's first appearance came on the heels of other Marvel B-movie sci-fi inspired robot stories in the pages of *Tales of Suspense.*[13] The state of American scientific know-how, however, was not a matter of childish fantasy in the 1960s. Locked in a space race with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R), many Americans feared that the U.S. had fallen behind their communist enemies. The U.S.S.R. launched the Sputnik satellite in 1957, prompting the passage of the National Defense Education Act. The goal of the act was to promote an educated citizenry capable of defending the country in a world increasingly confronted by totalitarian governments who challenged American leadership on the world stage.[14]

In the pages of Marvel Comics, Iron Man provided clear proof of American military and scientific know-how. Iron Man's political stance was, not surprisingly, pro-U.S. and anti-communist. Yet,

more than other comic characters, Iron Man's civilian identity offered a powerful counterpoint to the heroic persona. Tony Stark was more important to national defense than Iron Man because of his role as munitions manufacturer. The hero and the man were intimately connected to an anti-communist message. Iron Man had colorful foes, but he routinely faced garden-variety spies and saboteurs who sought to undermine Stark Industries. Indeed, when Stark/Iron Man faced communist threats, the stakes seemed amplified because of his dual role as corporate and military symbol. As an integral part of the military-industrial complex, Stark's responsibilities to produce weapons placed him under government scrutiny from federal officials, reflecting an emerging debate in postwar America over the role of scientists and their obligation to mainstream society.[15] At the same time, when Iron Man was challenged by his communist doppelganger Titanium Man, he accepted that challenge to prove American know-how was superior to communist power.

After 1968, as public opinion toward U.S. Cold War policy shifted, Iron Man underwent a conversion. The symbolic Cold War enemies and confrontations that framed the series were no longer emphasized. Villains who formerly expressed overt Cold War-themes, such as the Crimson Dynamo, lost their political motivations and instead were cast as deranged criminal madmen. In a story entitled "Long Time Gone," Iron Man pondered the implications of war. Sitting in his office, Tony Stark remembered an incident where he witnessed Stark Industries weapons laying waste to a village in Vietnam, killing enemies and innocent people alike. He asked himself, "What right had we to be there in the first place?" The story ended with Iron Man pledging to "avenge those whose lives have been lost through the ignorance of men like the man I once was!" Such sentiments reflect the loss of traditional authority that grew from failed Vietnam policy and the distrust created by government scandal. Iron Man adventures throughout the late 1970s reflected this de-emphasis on Cold War politics.[16]

The continual evolution of Iron Man allows the character to reflect ideas about defense, technology, and society. The character's newfound popularity, however, highlights the American ideological dissonance linked to security and the use of force. The ease of the character's re-orientation to face the modern-day terrorist threat, while retaining its Cold War elements, offers the chance to reflect on how Americans reconcile themselves with contemporary anti-terrorist activities. Over the course of Paramount Pictures' *Iron Man* film series, Tony Stark has evolved from callous and unaware weapon manufacturer to futurist who wants to safeguard the world. In the Marvel cinematic universe, key elements of the Iron Man persona are still defined by Cold War ideas, but they are re-contextualized within the U.S. War on Terror. Stark International's legacy is clearly traced to WWII efforts to defend democracy, but this legacy is extended through Stark to the contemporary anti-terror effort. Questions about abuse related to the military-industrial complex frame the first film as the pressure to seek profits to uphold the family legacy blind Stark to the consequences of his actions. By the second film, Stark has

abandoned weapons manufacturing, refusing to mass produce the Iron Man armor and asserting an individualistic moral directive, similar to the classic cowboy/gunslinger character who seeks to utilize his skill in the service of promoting a just society after some previous transgression. Finally, in *The Avengers*, Stark has embraced the "terrible privilege" of his power, an allegory of the United States' continued role as peacekeeper in the new millennium defined by terrorism's asymmetric warfare.

Superman is, by most standards at least, the first superhero; as such, the character allows us to analyze its cultural construction from political, social, and economic issues. Writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster acknowledged numerous influences on their creation, including Philip Wylie's novel *Gladiator*, Tarzan, and Douglas Fairbanks movies. Siegel and Shuster's personal experiences also shaped their creation. Both were second-generation Jewish immigrants. Urban violence had touched Siegel's life at the age of fourteen when his father was killed in a robbery. Shuster compensated for his near-sightedness and extreme shyness with bodybuilding. Thus, from an understanding of heroism drawn from immersion in books, magazines, and movies, Siegel and Shuster brought a personal perspective characteristic of their times: questions of manhood, ethnic identity, ability, respect, and justice. Indeed, Superman is the perfect immigrant narrative. He is an alien (another word for immigrant) who comes to the U.S. at a young age. He is raised in the heartland, acquiring the values associated with the frontier. As an adult he leaves the countryside and travels to the city, where his innate immigrant traits combined with his rural upbringing to allow him to improve society. Superman's dual identity was key to his success. Editor Sheldon Mayer declared, "The thing that really sold Superman in the first place . . . is the alter ego of the hero as contrasted to the crime fighter himself."[17] Superman was not the first hero with a dual identity. The Scarlet Pimpernel, secretly the foppish aristocrat Sir Percy Blakeney, set the pattern in Baroness Orczy's 1903 play. The popularity of this convention, however, was dwarfed by its use in superhero comics. As Peter Coogan, author of *Superhero: The Origins of a Genre* observes, superhero code names and identities externalize the hero's mission and biography, which added new dimensions to the convention of dual identity.[18] At the same time, both the creators and the audiences were shaped by modern media saturation. Siegel and Shuster were among the first generation of science fiction fans; Siegel's high school publication *Cosmic Stories* was arguably the first sci-fi fanzine. As Gerard Jones observes, "This was the first generation to grow up with access to an alternate universe provided by commercial entertainment." Even before Superman had been published, Siegel and Shuster had multimedia plans for their creation; among their early materials for developing the character are sketches of cereal and wheat cracker boxes with Superman's likeness. Debuting in comic books in 1938, Superman was portrayed in a newspaper comic strip starting in January 1939, in animated features by 1941, and in a novel and on the radio by 1942.[19]

Of course, by the 1950s Superman stood as the paramount example of Americanism for domestic and foreign audiences in the midst of Cold War politics. Indeed, "a never-ending battle for truth, justice, and the American way" was a tagline created for Superman's television adventures. Nonetheless, linked to flag and patriotic ideas, Superman is an entry-point for discussion of national identity. Indeed, the description "red, white, and blue" is connected to the flag, yet in his person and practice the "white" of the "red, white, and blue" in Superman is his skin, leading to questions about how assimilative identity is linked to character and the American experience. In the modern context, Superman's 2011 decision to renounce his U.S. citizenship in the pages of *Action Comics* number 900 offered a commentary on the feeling toward American global standing after a decade of warfare.

These are two examples of the depth and complexity that superhero comic book narratives can offer to explore the U.S. experience. For those interested in examining major problems in U.S history since the 1930s, the superhero comic narrative is an entryway to the evolution of social, political, and economic concerns. With the rising popularity of the comic book superhero across digital media platforms, the opportunities are increasing for analysis as more and more interpret and reinterpret the core symbolism of these characters in new media. As either allegory or direct commentary on pressing social issues, the superhero stands as a unique tool for the critical analysis of U.S. culture.

NOTES

1. For an examination of superhero as myth, see Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002). For an exploration of cultural context, consider Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon* (New York: Continuum, 2001) and for cultural analysis see Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society* (New York: Continuum, 2004).
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3. Debra Viadero, "Scholars See Comics as No Laughing Matter," *Education Week* (9 February 2009): 1–11.
4. Alicia C. Decker and Mauricio Castro, "Teaching History with Comic Books," *The History Teacher* 45 (2012): 178-179.
5. Decker and Castro, "Teaching History with Comic Books": 170-171.
6. M. Thomas Inge, "Comic Art," in *Concise Histories of American Popular Culture*, M. Thomas Inge, ed. (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 73.
7. Julian Chambliss, "Marvel, Bono, and Broadway: The Odyssey of *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*," PopMatters, http://www.popmatters.com/pm/post/143728-marvel-bono-and-broadway-the-odyssey-of-spider-man-turn-off-the-dark/ (accessed 27 November 2012).
8. Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), p. 24.
9. Ibid., pp. 30-31.
10. Shathley Q, "Generational Lag?: Talking With Rob Salkowitz #1," *PopMatters*, 11 May 2012, accessed May 12, 2012, http://www.popmatters.com/pm/post/158409-generational-lag-talking-with-rob-salkowitz-1/. Rob Salkowitz, *Comic-Con and the Business of Pop Culture: What the World's*

Wildest Trade Show Can Tell Us About the Future of Entertainment (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012).
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12. Victor Davis Hanson, "Military Technology and American Culture," *The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology and Society*, Number 1 (Spring 2003): 29-36.
13. Andy Mangels, *Iron Man: Beneath the Armor* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2008), p. 4.
14. Arthur S. Flemming, "The Philosophy and Objective of the National Defense Education Act," *Annuals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 327 (1960): 132.
15. Robert Genter, "With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility: Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 40 (2007): 968.
16. Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 241-243.
17. Julian C. Chambliss and William Svitavsky, "From pulp hero to superhero: Culture, race, and identity in American Popular Culture, 1900-1940," *Studies in American Culture* 30 (2008): 19-21.
18. Coogan, *Superhero*, p. 32.
19. Chambliss and Svitavsky, "From pulp hero to superhero": 19-21.