

Political Theory in Popular Culture
POSC 3421
Summer 2018
Professor Nicholas Tampio
MTWR 6-9 pm



The Marvel Universe has provided the basis for several of the most popular movies of the past decade, including Iron Man, Thor, Captain America: The Winter Soldier, Guardians of the Galaxy, Doctor Strange, and Black Panther, as well as Netflix series about Daredevil, Jessica Jones, and Luke Cage. Are these movies and shows teaching liberalism, conservatism, socialism, anarchism, fascism, multiculturalism, or something else entirely? How does the Marvel Universe reflect our time, and how does it express utopian and dystopian visions? Why are these movies and shows popular around the world—are they modern myths?

In the first half of each class, the professor lectures on political ideologies—their histories, authors, arguments, books, and legacy. In the second half, students lead a discussion about how a figure in the Marvel Universe fits within a broader political/cultural conversation. We will watch parts of movies, Netflix shows, and discuss academic articles about the Marvel Universe and the Cold War, gender roles, patriotism, post-9/11 politics, black superheroes, and Muslim femininities and masculinities.

It is serious course about political ideologies but also a fun opportunity to talk about the Marvel Universe.

Required reading

- Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, 6th Edition (Palgrave 2017), ISBN-10: 978113760602
- Subscribe to Marvel online for \$9.99/month

Grading

Research paper	
• Part 1	10
• Part 2	10
• Part 3	10
• Final paper and presentation	10
Article presentation	10
Midterm	20
Final exam	20
Class participation (including templates)	10

Students will write a 4500-6000 word (15-20 page) research paper on a political theme in the Marvel Universe. For the first three Mondays of the class, students will turn in a 5-page paper on a political theme in the Marvel Universe (women's rights, animal rights, economic justice, the individual versus the community, toleration, nuclear power, religion, etc.). The papers should discuss a Marvel movie, three reviews, and two academic articles. Then, the final paper will add an introduction, a conclusion, and edits based on feedback from the professor. See appendix for a template.

Article presentation: Each student is responsible for presenting a 20 minute Powerpoint on an academic article or book chapter that describes:

- The authors of the article
- The background to the article.
- The argument of the article
- How it illustrates political theory in popular culture.
- Your thoughts.

Course schedule

1. May 29 – Ideology and Ideologies

- *Political Ideologies*, Chapter 1
- What role do ideas play in politics? What is ideology? What is the difference between the political left, right, and center? Do we still live in an ideological age?
- Robert Gentner, “With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility”: Cold War Culture and the Birth of Marvel Comics,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 40, no. 6 (2007): 953–978.
- [How the Cold War saved Marvel and birthed a generation of superheroes](#), AV Club (2016).
- Break into groups to read [The Fantastic Four](#) and [The Incredible Hulk](#).

2. May 31 – Liberalism

- *Political Ideologies*, Chapter 2

- What are the origins and development of liberalism? What do liberals mean by individualism, freedom, reason, justice, and toleration? What is the difference between classical and modern liberalism?
- Antonio Pineda and Jesus Jimenez-Varea, “Popular Culture, Ideology, and the Comics Industry: Steve Ditko’s Objectivist Spider-Man,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 46, No. 6 (2013): 1156-1176.
- Break into groups to read [Amazing Fantasy 15 \(1962\)](#), or Spiderman origin stories of Doctor Octopus in issue #3 (July 1963); the Sandman in #4 (Sept. 1963); the Lizard in #6 (Nov. 1963); Electro in #9 (March 1964); and the Green Goblin in #14 (July 1964)

3. June 4 – Conservatism

- *Political Ideologies*, Chapter 3
- What are the origins and development of conservatism? What do conservatives mean by tradition, human imperfection, organic society, hierarchy and authority, and property? What is the difference between paternalistic conservatism and libertarian conservatism?
- Marvel Comics: The Untold Story, Chapter 11
- Watch first episode of Netflix episode of [Daredevil](#).

4. June 5 – Socialism

- *Political Ideologies*, Chapter 4
- What are the origins and development of socialism? What do socialists mean by community, cooperation, equality, and class politics? What is the difference between socialism, communism, and social democracy?
- Shannon Brown, “Silent Interlude: Signifiers of American Defeat, Decline, and Repudiation in Marvel Comics’ G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48 (no. 1), 2015:.
- Break into groups to read [GI Joe](#).
- **Part 1 due.**

5. June 6 – Anarchism

- *Political Ideologies*, Chapter 5
- What are the origins and development of anarchism? What do anarchists mean by anti-statism, utopianism, anti-clericalism, and economic freedom? What is the difference between collectivist anarchism and individualist anarchism?
- John M. Trushell, “American Dreams of Mutants: The X-Men—“Pulp” Fiction, Science Fiction, and Superheroes,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 38 (no. 1), 2004: 149-168.
- Break into groups to read [X-Men](#)

6. June 7 – Nationalism

- *Political Ideologies*, Chapter 6

- What are the origins and development of nationalism? What do nationalists mean by the nation, organic community, and self-determination? What is the difference between liberal, conservative, and postcolonial nationalism?
- Anika Hagley and Michael Harrison, "Fighting the Battles We Never Could: The Avengers and Post-September 11 American Political Identities," *PS: Political Science & Politics*; 2014, Vol. 47 Issue 1, p120-124
- Break into groups to read [The Avengers](#).

7. June 11 - Midterm + [Superheroes Decoded: American Legends](#)

8. June 12 - Fascism

- *Political Ideologies*, Chapter 7
- What are the origins and development of fascism? What do fascists mean by anti-rationalism, struggle, leadership and elitism, and ultranationalism? What is the relationship of fascism to the state and racism?
- Break into groups to read [Captain America](#).
- **Part 2 due.**

9. June 13 - Feminism

- *Political Ideologies*, Chapter 8
- What are the origins and development of feminism? What do feminists mean by the political, patriarchy, sex and gender, and equality and difference? What is the difference between liberal, socialist, radical, and third-wave feminism?
- Shenila Khoja-Moolji, "Comics as Public Pedagogy: Reading Muslim Masculinities through Muslim Feminities in Ms. Marvel," *Girlhood Studies* 8, no. 3 (2015): 22-39.
- Break into groups to read [Ms. Marvel](#).

10. June 14 - Ecologism

- *Political Ideologies*, Chapter 9
- What are the origins and development of ecologism? What do ecologists mean by ecology, holism, sustainability, and environmental ethics? What are the differences between modernist, social, and deep ecology?
- Tyler Scully and Kenneth Moorman, "The Rise of Vigilantism in 1980 Comics: Reasons and Outcomes," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 47, no. 3 (2014): 634-653.
- Break into groups to read [The Punisher](#).

11. June 18 - Religious fundamentalism

- *Political Ideologies*, Chapter 10
- What are the origins and development of religious fundamentalism? What do religious fundamentalists mean by modernity and religion as politics? What are the similarities and differences between Islamic and Christian fundamentalism?

- James Clements, Richard Gauvain, “The Marvel of Islam: Reconciling Muslim Epistemologies through a New Islamic Origin Saga in Naif al-Mutawa's The 99,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Volume 26, Number 1, Spring 2014, pp. 36-70.
- Watch [The 99 Comics: Islamic Superheros alongside Marvel](#)

12. June 19 – Multiculturalism

- *Political Ideologies*, Chapter 11
- What are the origins and development of multiculturalism? What do multiculturalists mean by the politics of recognition, culture and identity, minority rights, and diversity? What are the differences between liberal, pluralist, and cosmopolitan multiculturalism?
- Kenneth Ghee “Will the ‘Real’ Black Superhero please stand up?!”: A critical Analysis of mythological and cultural significance of black superheroes” in *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* (eds) Sheena Howard and Ronald Jackson III
- ‘Were all avengers now’: Community-building, civil religion and nominal multiculturalism in marvel comics’ fear itself, *European Journal of American Culture* Volume 35 Number 2
- **Part 3 draft due.**

13. June 20 – A Post-Ideological Age?

- *Political Ideologies*, Chapter 12
- What is the end of ideology/history thesis? What are arguments for the persistence of ideology?
- Joel Gruber, “The Dharma of Doctor Strange,” *Implicit Religion* 18, no. 3 (2015).
- Break into groups to read [Doctor Strange](#).

14. June 21 – Marvel Cinematic Universe

- [Wikipedia entry](#)
- “Marvel Rules the Universe,” *Fast Company*, May 1, 2017.

15. June 25 – TBD

16. June 26 – Final exam + [Superheroes Decoded: American Rebels](#)

17. June 27 – No class. Work on final paper.

18. June 28 – Final paper due + presentations

19. June 29 – Final paper due + presentations

Template for Reading a Comic Book

Title:

Publisher:

Year:

Writers:

Artists:

Editor:

Summarize the Plot:

What are the politics of the issue, broadly construed? You can focus on one issue (feminism, Cold War politics, masculinity, environmentalism, race, etc). or several.

How does it reflect its era?

Other thoughts, e.g. about why the character is popular, why it had or has to change, how it is distinctly American, or not; etc.

Research Paper Structure

Title that indicates topic and thesis

I. Introduction

1. Hook: Tell an interesting story and then raise a provocative question, i.e. Is the Marvel Universe feminist? Are the X-Men communists? Is the Marvel Universe ahead of or behind the curve of transgender awareness? Does the Marvel Universe maintain old-fashioned views of masculinity and is that a problem? Etc.
2. Map: Explain how you will answer the question by examining three Marvel movies. Say why these movies are the right ones to answer your question.

II. Theme X in Marvel Movie 1

- Answer the big question
- Explain the plot of the movie
- Cite 3 reviews and 2 academic articles or book chapters. The academic sources may be on the movie or the political issue, e.g. feminism.
- Consider the evidence in the movie that could support answering the question the other way. Complexity makes the paper better.
- The last few paragraphs can discuss your view on whether the movie is good or bad on the political issue.

III. Theme X in Marvel Movie 2

IV. Theme X in Marvel Movie 3

V. Conclusion

Articulate your own informed perspective. Answer the question that you raised in the introduction. And then share your thoughts about whether the Marvel movies are a force for good or bad, how they should be different going forward, etc. In general, the best way to articulate your own perspective is to contrast it with those of other smart people in the conversation. So if your paper is on how the Marvel Universe handles racism, engage with other people who have written on the topic and explain how you agree and disagree with them.