

Political Theory in Popular Culture



POSC 3421

Summer 2019

Professor Nicholas Tampio

MTWR 6-9 pm

The Marvel Universe has provided the basis for several of the most popular movies and television shows of the past decade, including The Avengers, Iron Man, X-Men, Thor, Captain America, Guardians of the Galaxy, Doctor Strange, 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?

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 the politics of a character in the Marvel Universe. It is serious course about political ideologies and a fun opportunity to talk about the Marvel Universe.

Required reading

- Andrew Heywood, *Political Ideologies: An Introduction*, 6th Edition (Palgrave 2017), ISBN-10: 978113760602

Grading

Research paper

- Part 1 10
- Part 2 10
- Part 3 10
- Final paper and presentation 10

Powerpoint + leading class discussion about a character 10

Midterm 20

Final exam 20

Class participation 10

Students will write a 4500-word (15 page) research paper on a political theme in the Marvel Universe. For the first three Mondays of the class, students will turn in a 1500-word 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 television show or movie, three reviews, and two academic sources. Then, the final paper will add an introduction, a conclusion, and edits based on feedback from the professor. See appendix for a template.

Each student in the course will be responsible for leading a 1 hour class discussion about a Marvel character. Using a Powerpoint and up to 10 minutes of videos, students should explain the history of the superhero, the scholarly literature on the superhero (including the assigned article), the politics of the superhero (and how they have changed), and the student's thoughts. The purpose is to have a lively conversation about the politics of the Marvel Universe.

Course schedule

1. May 28 - Defining Ideologies + Fantastic Four

- *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).
- Read, as a class, the first issue of [The Fantastic Four](#)

2. May 29 - Liberalism + Spiderman

- *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.
 - Read, as a class, [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. May 30 – Conservatism + Iron Man
- *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?
 - Ashley Suffle Robinson, “We are Iron Man,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51(4): 2018.
4. June 3 – Socialism + GI Joe
- *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.
 - **Part 1 due.**
5. June 4 – Anarchism + Deadpool
- *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?
 - Benjamin Triana, “Deadpool: When Our (Anti)Heroes Do Less and We Reward Them More,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51(4), 2018.
6. June 5 – Nationalism + Captain America
- *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?

- Vernon, M.. “Subversive Nostalgia, or Captain America at the Museum,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 49(1), 2016.

7. June 6 – Midterm + Netflix show

8. June 10 – Fascism + Punisher

- *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?
- 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.
- **Part 2 due.**

9. June 11 – Feminism + Ms. Marvel

- *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.

10. June 12 - Ecologism + Avengers

- *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?
- [First casualty of 'Avengers: Infinity War' - environmental understanding.](#) Yale Climate Connections, 2018.

11. June 13 – Religious fundamentalism + The 99

- *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.

12. June 17 – Multiculturalism + Guardians of the Galaxy

- *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?
- Eliana Dockterman, “Everyone’s a Superhero,” *Time* (2015).
- Martin Flanagan, Andrew Livingstone, Mike McKenny, Star-Lord, Who?: Guardians of the Galaxy - Raiding the 'B-List' for New Legends
- **Part 3 draft due.**

13. June 18 – Populism + Iron Fist

- Jan-Werner Muller, [The Rise and Rise of Populism?](#)
- What is the end of ideology/history thesis? What are arguments for the persistence of ideology?
- Daniel Martin, “The Americanization of the Hong Kong Kung Fu Hero: Orientalism and Social Class in Marvel Comics’ *Iron Fist*,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 51(6): 2018.

14. June 19 – African-American political thought + Black Panther

- Ta-Nehisi Coates, [The Case for Reparations, Atlantic](#)
- Christopher Lebron, ['Black Panther' Is Not the Movie We Deserve | Boston Review](#)
- Melvin Rogers, [The Many Dimensions of Black Panther | Dissent Magazine](#)

15. June 20 – Feminism + Jessica Jones

- Iris Marion Young, [“Throwing Like a Girl”](#), *Human Studies*, 1980.
- Emily Nussbaum, [“Graphic, Novel,”](#) *The New Yorker*, 2015.
- Zoe Williams, [“Jessica Jones,”](#) *The Guardian*, 2018.

16. June 24 – John Milewski of the Wilson Center will visit to discuss how the Marvel Universe addressed 9/11.

17. June 25 – Final exam

18. June 26 – Final paper due + presentations

19. June 27 – Final paper due + presentations

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? 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? Should the Marvel Universe accommodate Chinese political sensibilities? 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 Comic, Movie, or Television Show 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 Comic, Movie, or Television Show 2

IV. Theme X in Marvel Comic, Movie, or Television Show 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.