

# "We're not fighting for the people anymore... We're just fighting." : US-American superhero comics between criticisms of community and critical communities

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“We’re not fighting for *the people* anymore . . . We’re just *fighting*.” US-American Superhero Comics  
Between Criticisms of Community  
and Critical Communities

Thomas Nehrlich and Joanna Nowotny

From its creation in the late 1930s onwards, the figure of the superhero has become increasingly ambiguous and problematic. Especially in two crucial periods of recent history – the height of the Cold War in the 1980s as well as after 9/11 – superheroes are presented as precarious, dubious characters that have lost the ability to fulfill traditional heroic functions such as conveying social norms and moral values, and regulating the use of violence. To reinforce their social relevance and to reestablish their bond with the (usually US-American) community, modern superhero narratives focus on the very relationships between superheroes and the population. Seminal publications of the genre such as Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1986/87), Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Mark Millar’s *Civil War* (2006/07) open up a discussion of what heroism means and how it relates to “ordinary” people. In them, the question arises if superheroes are even capable of speaking for their communities. Analyzing the relationship between superheroes and their communities contributes to understanding how superhero narratives have become a hugely influential medium of social debate.

The popularity of the figure of the superhero has reached new heights with the success of Marvel’s and DC’s movie and TV franchises in recent years. This success bears testimony to the ongoing attempts of the comics industry to make their products as relatable as possible for as

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many people as possible. Originally, superhero comics sought to address younger readers,<sup>1</sup> as evidenced by the frequent presence of a young sidekick that served as a figure of identification for the intended audiences in many of the famous early stories – Batman and Robin would be the most known example. Early stories often presented a rather simplistic moral tale and plain power fantasies to their young readers. At the genre's inception during the 1930s through the 1950s, female characters,<sup>2</sup> non-white ethnicities, and members of the lower class were marginalized or appeared mostly in the roles of antagonists.<sup>3</sup>

In order to diversify their stories' appeal and to address different communities, the publishers have taken a number of measures: Since the 1960s and 1970s, the comics' ethnic diversity has been increased by the presence of black and Native American superheroes like The Falcon (first appearance in 1969) and Thunderbird (first appearance in 1975). More recently, religious diversity has been promoted, for example, through the inclusion of Muslim characters: Since 2013, Pakistani-American Kamala Khan has been appearing as Miss Marvel, wearing a modified burkini as her costume. Also in more recent years, LGBT themes have been addressed for example through same-sex superhero couples.<sup>4</sup> Such measures have made the diegetic communities more diverse, and, accordingly, superhero comics have gathered a large and rather pluralistic audience of committed aficionados.<sup>5</sup> Superhero fandom is characterized by a strong dedication to the source material and a

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<sup>1</sup> Dittmer remarks that apart from having a readership mostly made up of “preadolescent male[s],” superhero comics, during World War II, were also sent overseas as entertainment for the troops. But “as the medium has aged, so has its readership,” with older fans and collectors gaining prominence at the latest in the 1980s (Dittmer 4-5).

<sup>2</sup> The exception would be Wonder Woman (introduced in 1941), a character that was used specifically to target female audiences and encourage emancipation (Daniels 22-23 et passim).

<sup>3</sup> For the racial aspects, cf. e.g., Munson; C. Scott.

<sup>4</sup> This list does not imply that all diversity in comic books is necessarily “progressive,” when studied in detail. To give an example: LGBT themes have also been addressed in a problematic manner, e.g., when DC comics introduced the superhero Extraño (“the strange one”) in *New Guardians* 1988, a homosexual Peruvian mage in brightly-colored robes who often referred to himself as a “witch” and was HIV-positive, a perpetuation of several of the most common prejudices against gay men. Extraño has been revived recently in an obvious attempt to reinvent the character in a manner less damaging to the LGBT cause (*Midnighter and Apollo* 1, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> As evidenced, for example, by online communities such as [worldofblackheroes.com](http://worldofblackheroes.com), [carol-corps.wikia.org](http://carol-corps.wikia.org) and [gayleague.com](http://gayleague.com).

collectivizing cohesion within the fan community, as evidenced by numerous fanzines, wikis, comic conferences, and cosplay practices.

With those real-world communities and the issue of representation in mind, the question arises what kinds of communities are relevant within the genre and how exactly those communities and the superheroes' interactions with them are depicted. As Miczo along with others has noted, an essential characteristic of superheroism is the capacity of the heroes to act in concert with one another (Miczo 1 et passim). These types of superhero communities are evident in a number of successful superhero teams, such as The Justice League (DC) or The Avengers (Marvel). However, the superheroes also interact with another kind of community, namely, the (often US-American) ordinary population. This interaction takes place in what Miczo calls "the public sphere" (ibid. xi et passim). Here, the superhero acts as a special kind of public servant, serving the "common good."<sup>6</sup> Naturally, however, there are "rival definitions of this good that, from time to time, cause friction within the superhero community" (ibid. 22). We would argue that such frictions, rather than being limited to the superhero community, also extend to the "public sphere": When superheroes and ordinary people disagree about their mutual rights and duties, their relationship, too, becomes problematic.

Our essay traces these two types of precarious relationships in seminal examples of the genre. By doing so, we aim to show that through notions of superheroism, communal values such as civil rights, security, and personal liberties are debated. Superheroes can be construed as representatives of ideological positions within this ethical debate about how human society should be organized.<sup>7</sup> However, in the provocative examples of the genre we have chosen for analysis, it becomes less than clear-cut how such ideological positions relate to real-world politics and ethics, and whether their representatives, the superheroes, in fact speak on behalf, or even to the benefit, of the ordinary people – within the narratives and beyond.

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<sup>6</sup> This is not necessarily a specificity of superheroism but rather a common trait of heroic narratives, such as the so-called American monomyth (cf. Dittmer 11).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Pellitteri.



*The Early Days: Superheroes as Protectors and Crime Fighters*

Ever since Superman's first appearance in a comic book in 1938, superheroes have challenged society's relationship with them. By their sheer extraordinariness, they are their readers' opposite by definition. Their superpowers make them outsiders, yet they often defend the social status quo. Simultaneously embodying and transgressing the law, they clash with the official institutions of the USA, for example, while still representing truly "American" values. This ambiguity has led to superheroes being used for nationalistic purposes such as fighting Hitler and advocating American military mobilization during World War II. For example, they were used to advertise war stamps and bonds, using slogans such as "Wonder Woman says – do your duty for Uncle Sam by buying U.S [sic] savings stamps and bonds!" (*Sensation Comics* 8, 1942).

Ditschke and Anhut argue that, essentially, there are two classical models of superheroes with slightly different approaches towards society (150-56). On the one hand, superheroes act as protectors of the innocents, save lives, and defend good against evil, as do the classical versions of Superman, Captain America, and the Flash. On the other hand, they act as crime fighters, targeting criminals and villains, which is true for many iterations of Batman and Daredevil. These different intentions can be seen, for instance, in the visual rhetoric of the superheroes' costume design, with Superman's bright colors and unmasked face likening him to a police officer while Batman's dark and gadget-rigged suit resembles the gear of counterterrorism units (e.g., in Christopher Nolan's recent movie adaptations). Aside from their differing methods, both models convey the same view of the relationship between superheroes and society, namely, a stable, affirmative, and unquestioned bond. This is what Peter Coogan, in his famous definition of the superhero, refers to as the "selfless, pro-social mission" (21) that is a crucial quality of superheroes. As a reward, the superhero is venerated by the community. In other words, altruism, solidarity, and communality as well as admiration and gratitude are the ideological foundations of the classical superhero in the so-called Golden Age of the genre, from the late 1930s until after World War II.

However, this positive depiction of the relationship between superhero and society has not remained uncontested. Since the 1950s, as the immediate military justification for their existence had faded away, superheroes have been criticized from political, legal, religious, educational, and psychological points of view. For instance, superhero comics have been accused of weakening the authority of the government and disre-

specting the government's monopoly on violence and the use of force. The 1954 anti-comics study *Seduction of the Innocent* by the psychiatrist Fredric Wertham is the best-known example of such critique, claiming that different comic genres such as horror and superhero comics propagate sexual deviance and cause juvenile delinquency. As a result, the comics industry established the Comics Code Authority, a system of self-censorship designed to avoid controversial content.

Such tensions that question the beneficial role of superheroes have fueled stories within the genre itself that focus on the relationship between superheroes, the people, and the government. The question these comics ask is how the bond between superhero and the community of ordinary people is affected and regulated by the state. As a matter of fact, some of the most acclaimed superhero comics since the 1960s have featured a government's attempt to limit the powers of the superheroes, forcing them to cooperate or to become outlaws, excluded from their communities. Essentially, these are stories about the conflict between control, registration, and bureaucracy on the one hand, and freedom, nonconformity, privacy on the other; they deal with the tensions between the individual's, the community's, and the state's interests.<sup>8</sup> This turns superhero comics into an inherently political genre: What is at stake is nothing less than how US-America, the country in which the majority of superhero comics are set, defines itself and the rights of its citizens.

*The Problematization of the Superhero: Frank Miller and Alan Moore*

In the 1980s, two works of great influence were published that were particularly self-reflective with regard to the problematic triad of superhero, community and state: Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* (1986/87). They contributed to what was widely seen as a corruption of the figure of the superhero, a tendency – adopted in many other comics of the era – towards presenting the characters as borderline psychopathic vigilantes or power-hungry narcissists. This destruction of innocence has led to the 1980s being considered the “dark and gritty” age of superhero comics.

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<sup>8</sup> For a Derridean reading of the political implications of superhero comics see Curtis 212-15.

Miller's comic presents us with an aged Batman who retired ten years before the beginning of the story, deliberately disrupting his bond with the community. His "return to duty" is provoked by a brutal criminal organization that he then manages to defeat. Instead of securing and repacifying the city, however, his renewed presence as a masked vigilante becomes itself the cause of intensified criminal activity.<sup>9</sup> Villains such as his archenemy, the Joker, who had long been dormant, resurface and terrorize the population. The fact that the resurgence of crime coincides with the return of the hero implies that superheroes might not be a solution, but rather part of the problem. What legitimates the presence of superheroes if their very existence causes the threats they claim to fight in the name of the community?

Later in the story, during a nuclear crisis between the USA and the Soviet Union, Batman, by acting as a local peacekeeper, comes into conflict with the US government. The president himself, easily identifiable as a caricature of Ronald Reagan, sees his authority challenged and sends the police after Batman, declaring him an outlaw and forcing him to fight the police and the very people he tried to protect. Ultimately, the president orders Superman, who acts as a state official and as a pawn of the government, to dispose of Batman. In the final fight, Batman, through the use of kryptonite, seems to have the upper hand against Superman, but is suddenly stopped and nearly killed by a heart attack. In one of the last panels, the picture of a beaten up Superman comforting an agonizing Batman demonstrates the senselessness and absurdity of superheroes forced to fight each other for political purposes. *The Dark Knight Returns* was one of the first comics to drastically depict violent conflicts between fellow superheroes instead of showing how their ability to set aside differences is a major factor in their heroism. In so doing, it calls into question the superheroes' beneficial role and their value for the community of ordinary people.

Moore's *Watchmen* raises similarly provocative questions: Do extraordinary individuals have the right to elevate themselves above the law and supposedly defend the US-American communities? Or should superheroes be state-supervised because the population needs to be protected from them? Who watches the watchmen?<sup>10</sup> To problematize the legal, ethical, political, and ideological foundation of our community with superheroes, *Watchmen* confronts us with a number of superheroes

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the intricate politics and ethics of Batman's vigilantism in *The Dark Knight Returns* see DuBose 919-23.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hughes 546-48, 556.

who challenge the classical patterns of superheroism.<sup>11</sup> Rorschach is the only member of a former superhero group who, once the government has banned vigilantism, keeps on with his activities in secret. His stubbornness is mixed with pessimism and cruelty. In his view, mankind is, in essence, evil. Dr. Manhattan, who has gained god-like powers in a nuclear accident, prefers to live on Mars and distances himself from earthly matters and almost all human beings. Night Owl tries to remedy his impotence by engaging in a superhero costume fetish; his superheroic identity becomes the outlet of a crisis of masculinity instead of a sign of altruism. And Ozymandias kills millions in his attempt to fake an alien invasion and to unite the world against an external enemy.

The common denominator of all these characters, who can be construed as perversions or escalations of classical superheroes, is their anti-social behavior. At the height of the Cold War, Alan Moore uses them as a means to deconstruct the image of the shining superhero and to demonstrate the detrimental effects of both state control and unrestrained heroic politics.

It is part of Moore's astute irony that he eventually has Ozymandias's plan work, despite, or precisely because of, its immorality and inhumanity. Rorschach, the only superhero to oppose Ozymandias, is silenced and killed by Dr. Manhattan. Faced with an allegedly extraterrestrial threat, the USA and the Soviet Union manage to overcome their antagonism; the Cold War ends. At the very end of the story, however, Rorschach's notebook, the only proof of the superhero conspiracy, falls into the hands of an inexperienced civilian journalist. The ultimate moral decision lies with a character that is not part of the community of superheroes. It remains unclear whether the journalist grasps the significance of the notebook and will make its contents public. Thus, instead of presenting them with a ready-made morality, *Watchmen* opens a dialogue with the readers and requests them to make up their own minds. It asks them whether they would want the superheroes to be exposed and potentially punished, or whether they would want the greater good – world peace – and the bond between the superheroes and the people to be preserved at all costs. If they were in the shoes of that ordinary journalist, what would they do?

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<sup>11</sup> Pellitteri explains in great detail which superhero in *Watchmen* represents which ideology (cf. Pellitteri 85-88).

*Real-life Heroism and Corrective Communities: Superheroes after 9/11*

Some 15 years later, after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, superheroes were again used to directly comment on political developments. As in the 1980s, the depiction and symbolic value of superheroes remain profoundly ambivalent. On the one hand, they are assimilated to the “ordinary man” in positive terms, representing the heroic in all Americans and thereby reinforcing the community’s bond with them. On the other hand, they are used to illustrate the dangerous clash between the individual and the state in an age of increasing surveillance and preemptive strikes against perceived threats to the nation.

The attacks on the World Trade Center saw a kind of “real-life American heroism” celebrated across the media. Both Marvel and DC produced comic books featuring the “heroes” of 9/11, for example by showing the Avengers standing alongside the firefighters and other first responders and rescue workers that were on duty on Ground Zero.<sup>12</sup> Marvel published two comic books in immediate reaction to the attack; both were benefit products and financially very successful.<sup>13</sup> The first one was called *Heroes* and was published in December 2001 with *The world’s greatest superhero creators honor the world’s greatest heroes* printed on the cover as a subtitle; the second one followed in February 2002 and was entitled *A Moment of Silence*. The first volume especially featured contributions from a multitude of creators, some of whom had a reputation of being rebellious and of taking an ironic or subversive stance towards comic books, like Alan Moore. Others, like Neal Adams, had not even primarily been associated with Marvel previously, which bears testimony to the unifying quality the events of 9/11 had within the comics industry.

A prominent figure in *Heroes* is Captain America, who represents the USA unlike any other Marvel character. He is frequently shown alongside and somewhat on par with the rescue personnel, the NYPD and the FDNY. In an artwork by Rob Haynes, Tim Townsend, and David Self, a policeman and a fireman are shown giving comfort to a weeping, overwhelmed Captain America and encouraging him to go on. As this scene shows, *Heroes* has a simple premise, as does *A Moment of Silence*. Both books try to establish that heroes akin to or even superior to the super-

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<sup>12</sup> C. Scott (336-37) compared the propaganda in comic books after 9/11 with that during World War II and discussed the DC and Marvel tributes.

<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, *Amazing Spider-Man* 2:36 (2001), with its entirely black cover, also dealt with the events of 9/11.



heroes exist in the real world, thereby inverting the classical roles of the superhero and the community. This assertion comes with the idea that it is necessary to transition from adolescence to adulthood, a phase in which one comes to realize what responsibility in the real world entails (Diekmann). Paradoxically, growing up seems to require one to leave the superheroes of fiction behind, to overcome them, a point which seems rather out of place in a superhero comic, of all things. Marvel's 9/11 comics seem to advocate the superfluousness of fictional heroes for adults by selling them a comic book featuring those very fictional heroes.

However, the real-life heroism that is celebrated both in *A Moment of Silence* and in *Heroes* is not that different from what is advocated in many superhero comics. It is a concept of heroism that relies on the immediate deed, on action in the face of calamity and in the name of a community that gets attacked from without. In *A Moment of Silence*, this notion is put into practice through the almost complete absence of text.<sup>14</sup> This comic book thereby becomes a manifesto against the inaction of people that are more concerned with medially spreading their experiences than with actively taking part in them, as Bill Jemas writes. Action takes precedence to speech, which is framed as escapist and "meaningless":

When hell hit the World Trade Center, most of us stood around talking – making phone calls, writing e-mails and, generally, filling in that hole in our bellies with meaningless chatter. But in the face of extreme danger, thousands of New York firefighters, police officers and rescue workers burst onto the scene. These men and women saved thousands of lives and many sacrificed their own. "Judge people by what they do, not by what they say". That's what I learned from my mother and my father; that is what I teach my children, but I did not truly know what that meant until this past September. (Jemas, Bagley, and Hanna n. pag.)

While many 9/11 comic books dealt with this new kind of American heroism and focused on the solidarity of the US-American community across ethnicities and religions, with the characters often calling "for tolerance of ethnic groups that lived in the United States, especially Arab-Americans" (C. Scott 336), the other side of the coin was just as present in superhero comics. The "War on Terror" slipped into super-

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<sup>14</sup> Some scholars, like Robert C. Harvey, would go as far as to hold that images *and* text are essential in order for a cultural artefact to be classified as a "comic." Such a definition would make the lack of text in a publication within the superhero comic genre even more striking. For an overview of the debate around the definition of comics as a medium, see Meskin.

hero stories almost as soon as it was declared.<sup>15</sup> A prime example of comics partaking in and thereby also shaping this political discourse is *Civil War*, the 7-issue comic event Marvel published in 2006/2007, written by Mark Millar and penciled by Steve McNiven.<sup>16</sup> It implicitly deals with the political situation in the USA post 9/11 and specifically with the *USA PATRIOT ACT* that was passed immediately after the terrorist attacks and that aimed to enhance “domestic security against terrorism,” to “deter and punish terrorist acts in the United States and around the world,” and to remove “obstacles to investigating terrorism.”<sup>17</sup> Naturally, the debate about this act dealt with questions of civil rights and privacy (Veloso and Bateman 428-29).

*Civil War* reflects on this debate. It poses some fundamental political and philosophical questions by making the issue personal for its two protagonists, Captain America and Iron Man. A “Superhero Registration Act” (SHRA) gets approved by Congress after a catastrophe caused by a young, untrained superhero claims the life of many innocents, mainly children. Iron Man aka Tony Stark decides to support the Act, obliging the costumed heroes to expose their identities to the government. His argumentation in favor of the Act centers on the responsibilities superheroes have for their communities – just like policemen, they should not be allowed to operate outside of jurisdiction. Iron Man’s decision in favor of accountability pits him against Captain America aka Steve Rogers, who insists on the freedom of the individual and criticizes the infringement of privacy. A gulf opens up between the ‘real’ American values that the patriotically named Captain America upholds and potentially corrupt institutions betraying them. In his opinion, the state institutions do not properly represent the American communities anymore; instead, the superheroes do, protecting all Americans to the best of their abilities even if they have to go against official US-American law. After a clash with some government officials, the Captain goes underground and proceeds to fight the Act illegally.

Both known and respected figures in the superhero community, Iron Man and Captain America quickly gather a number of followers, respectively. The split in the superhero community becomes bigger as both fractions resort to increasingly dubious, even evil methods, such as

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<sup>15</sup> For a reading of the superhero movies *Batman Begins* and *V for Vendetta* as implicitly participating in a post-9/11 discourse, see Hassler-Forest.

<sup>16</sup> A whole edited volume dealing with the event from a critical perspective has just been published: Scott, *Marvel Comics’ Civil War and the Age of Terror*.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. USA PATRIOT ACT.



enlisting known villains to fight in their ranks. When the fight escalates into a full-blown war in the middle of New York, Rogers gets the opportunity to deliver a killing blow to a defeated Stark, who asks his friend-turned-enemy to “*finish* it.” However, a group of civilians holds him back, which prompts the Captain to question his actions and vocalize the tensions inherent in the relationship between the superheroes and their community: “We’re not fighting for *the people* anymore . . . We’re just *fighting*” (*Civil War* 7, 2007). In stark contrast to the image found in *Heroes* of Captain America receiving comfort from rescue workers, the panels from *Civil War*, published a mere few years later, feature policemen and firefighters confronting Captain America. The group of citizens is obviously intended to represent modern US-American society as a whole, as it is, for instance, racially diverse, featuring white persons, African Americans, and a man who seems to be of Asian ancestry. Accordingly, the US-American community here clearly stands in opposition to the superhero named after his nation.<sup>18</sup> The very rescue workers that were shown to represent a higher brand of heroism for their community in the comics explicitly dealing with 9/11 step in to stop the superhero from making a grave mistake. Thus, the heroism of the superhero is called into question: Not only are ‘normal’ citizens shown to be potentially equally heroic, as in the immediate post-9/11 comics, but in addition they act as a moral corrective to the superheroes in the *Civil War* event. Hence the classical roles of superhero narratives are inverted, the superheroes cease to be the morally superior guides and protectors of an admiring society; rather, the “people” emancipate themselves from the superheroes. The superheroes themselves are endangering their own communities by “just fighting,” fighting each other rather than criminals and villains. Hence, superheroes fail at fulfilling their social function, which includes representing moral values and advocating the rights of their communities.

The conflict in *Civil War*, while political, is also elevated to a level of moral philosophy. Formulated in such a way, two outlooks on life and ethical behavior clash, Captain America’s deontology insisting on the intrinsic moral value of certain acts, and Iron Man’s utilitarianism, holding that in a climate of fear and distrust people have a right to expect accountability.<sup>19</sup> This philosophical underpinning waters down the po-

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<sup>18</sup> This choice of side characters is explicitly noted in the script to the series; see *Civil War: Script Book* 7, 19: “rescue workers [medics, firefighters, cops, etc.] all grabbing Cap and pulling him back off Tony.”

<sup>19</sup> In tie-ins to the main series, the fact that Stark is choosing the “lesser evil” is driven home in particularly obvious terms, as it is revealed that he was aware of alternative

litical thrust of the series, as it masks a concrete political issue in general terms where no “right” or “wrong” can be determined. In fact, the tag used for the event all along – “Whose side are you on?” – implies that there is no “right” side to choose. Befitting the emotional tone of the advertisements and the story itself, the event was hotly debated among readers, reviewers, and, apparently, the creators themselves.<sup>20</sup>

*Civil War* follows the typical structure of newer Marvel event books, a structure consisting of a main series written by one writer, tie-ins into other series of the Marvelverse, and some one-shots or mini-series only published as part of the event. All in all, it consists of more than 100 comic books. If one were to analyze in detail the ways the narrative is built and framed in the entire event, it would become obvious that even basic tenets such as what the Superhero Registration Act precisely entails are not consistently depicted – in fact, not even the name of the Act remains the same throughout.<sup>21</sup> In some comics the Act requires the heroes to give up their identities to the government and undergo frequent testing or training of their superpowers, while in others it is implied that they actually have to make their identities public. In some comics, the refusal to sign the Act would lead to legal persecution, while in others the heroes in question would be locked away without a trial or any regular legal procedure until they agree to sign, becoming “legal nonentities” at the mercy of the state (cf. *Amazing Spider-Man* 535).<sup>22</sup> Such inconsistencies<sup>23</sup> lead to a different image of each side depending on what parts of the event one has read. Both certain parts of the read-

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plans for the superhero community which would have involved locking up its members to experiment on their augmented biologies (*Civil War: Casualties of War*).

<sup>20</sup> For example, several remarks by Millar and others in the *Civil War: Script Book* insinuate such conflicts, see e.g., editor Tom Brevoort’s quote about the depiction of Stark in tie-in issues (No. 4, page 6) or Millar’s quote about issue 6, page 11, where he contends that the writers of the tie-in books “demonized” some characters.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g., the “Superhero Registration Act” in *New Avengers: Illuminati* 0. The name changes to the “Superhuman Registration Act” in *New Avengers* 1:22 although both are written by the same writer, Brian Michael Bendis – a point also made by Davidson (12-13).

<sup>22</sup> Miczo deals with the Spider-Man tie-ins that describe *prison 42* – designated holding place for heroes convicted under the SHRA – as non-American soil. In Stark’s words: “American laws don’t touch here. [. . .] Once non-registrants come here, they’re legal nonentities.” In Miczo’s eyes, those issues show the “critical mistake of the pro-registration side” that “forfeit[s] the moral high ground” they would otherwise possess (Miczo 32-33).

<sup>23</sup> These and other problems with the depiction of the SHRA are also highlighted by Davidson, who holds that such inconsistencies, along with the legal illogic of the proposed act, contributed to the very mixed reception of the event; cf. Davidson 11-25.

ership<sup>24</sup> as well as some of the creators seem to have responded very negatively to Iron Man's side in the conflict,<sup>25</sup> which in real-life terms would be a poorly disguised stand-in for the much debated Bush administration and its USA PATRIOT ACT infringing on the privacy of the ordinary citizens. Such readings construe the pro-registration side as the "evil" that needs to be vanquished in the series and, to put it in extreme terms, by extension qualify the actions of the US government after 9/11 as villainous.

Veloso and Bateman have analyzed the main series of *Civil War*, the seven issues written by Mark Millar and drawn by Steve McNiven, and come to a very different conclusion. While they do emphasize that there seems to be no clear separation of right and wrong at the beginning of the story, they hold that this changes as the series progresses. They argue that the beginning of the story allows both sides to have valid arguments, presumably a strategy to augment the potential economic success of the book: presenting both points of view as valid means ensuring a larger audience. Furthermore, in Veloso's and Bateman's eyes, refraining from moral judgments at the outset of *Civil War* allows the writers to potentially change people's minds by the end of the story (Veloso and Bateman 434). But by the end, Veloso and Bateman claim that the event does present a clear "right" after all, and it lies with the winner of the war. According to the researchers, the end is entirely positive: Captain America has surrendered and Tony Stark is shown at sunset, looking directly at the reader, a smile on his lips as he says: "the best is yet to come" (*Civil War* 7, 2007). They claim:

What is discursively constructed here, therefore, is that when different groups oppose each other against the Registration Act (as the allegory of the PATRIOT Act), they lose their focus on what is the most important thing: fighting against terrorism. [. . .] The system is not perfect, there are collateral damages, to use the military term, but it is necessary and the system is to be trusted. Thus, criticism is offered only to, in the end, save the Government, which then emerges from the narrative stronger and clearly necessary for maintaining order and public safety. (Veloso and Bateman 439)

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<sup>24</sup> Of course, such things are difficult to measure, but Tony Stark seems to have been seen as the villain in the story by many readers. This certainly contributed to the fact that Marvel tried to "redeem" him in the years after the event, finally having him wipe the memories of his actions during *Civil War* from his mind to start anew.

<sup>25</sup> See also Miczo (34), who, however, does not establish a connection between those reactions and the clear political subtext of the event at the time of its publication.

To capture the essence of the argument: According to Veloso and Bateman, the event ends up favoring Iron Man's side and, by extension, presenting the Bush administration as justified and as capable of meeting the needs of the US-American people.

While Veloso and Bateman's analysis of the multimodal construction of meaning in the *Civil War* series is very thorough and also impressive in its attention to the formal aspects of the comic, this conclusion could be called into question. The last panels of the comic can for example just as well be construed as ironic, especially in the light of Iron Man's questionable actions in the preceding war. "The best is yet to come," then, might not be a comforting final chord but a disharmonious announcement of ever more conflict or ever more dubious actions on the part of the superheroes elevating themselves above their communities. Furthermore, Veloso and Bateman deliberately only focus on the 7 issues of the main series, leaving out both the tie-ins and one-shots linked to the event and the wider macro-narrative at play in the Marvel universe. For over a decade, the serial storytelling in Marvel comics has been characterized by a very developed macro structure, where events tie together and often have consequences for the world state. Taking into account both the tie-ins, in which Iron Man's side is at times presented in exceedingly negative terms,<sup>26</sup> and above all the wider narrative context in which the *Civil War* event stands, the "message" and with it the identification of what side is wrong becomes much less clear-cut than Veloso and Bateman ultimately claim.

At the end of *Civil War*, Stark becomes head of the global peace-keeping organization S.H.I.E.L.D., which leads Veloso and Bateman to conclude that 'all is well' in government (despite the fact that it is, by the way, not entirely clear what S.H.I.E.L.D.'s legal status is – as an international organization, it is not supposed to be directly linked to the US government).<sup>27</sup> However, the next few events Marvel has published radically destroy this notion of the "good" political leaders or the trustworthy government. First, there is *World War Hulk*, which is partly caused by Stark and other pro-registration advocates like Reed Richards and wreaks havoc in New York. This catastrophe is followed by *Secret Invasion* (2008). If *Civil War* depicts an inner instead of an outer enemy

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<sup>26</sup> For example in the Spider-Man tie-ins (*Amazing Spider-Man* 1:529-38) or the *War Crimes* one-shot.

<sup>27</sup> The exact status of the "global peacekeeping organization" S.H.I.E.L.D. is unclear (or rather contradictory) in the comics, but in *Civil War* the Director, Maria Hill, clearly speaks on behalf of "the American people" (*Civil War* 1, 2006). See also Davidson 13-14.

that seeds unrest in the country, *Secret Invasion* deals with this topic even more explicitly by having aliens in disguise – the so-called Skrulls – invade the USA and its governmental institutions, destroying the nation from within. Naturally, humanity manages to prevail, but at a high price, with countless casualties and damages all over the world. Norman Osborn, the known supervillain Green Goblin, rises to power in Stark's stead, dismantles S.H.I.E.L.D., and ushers in a reign of terror known as *Dark Reign* that lasts for several years both within the fictional Marvelverse and in Marvel's actual comics output during the late 2000s, forcing most of the known heroes into hiding.

Taking the wider narrative context of the *Civil War* event into account is one way of dismantling a reading of the event as a straightforward defense of the political status quo in the USA post 9/11. Another interpretative strategy relies on questioning how seamlessly and clearly the political metaphor of the USA PATRIOT ACT can be applied to the comic book(s). As noted, most political readings of the *Civil War* event identify the Iron Man's pro-registration side with the Bush administration and presume that the readers would identify with the anti-registration heroes as stand-ins for the members of the US-American communities whose civil liberties are threatened. However, such readings completely ignore the third party involved in the argument the narrative presents: the ordinary citizens threatened by the unregulated use of violence by the superheroes and antagonized by their refusal to be held accountable. These citizens come to the forefront in the final battle; they interject before Captain America can deal the final blow to a defeated Stark, and ostensibly defend the figurehead of the pro-registration heroes (“*Get the hell away from him!*”, *Civil War* 7, 2007).

Dittmer has rightfully noted how Captain America “discursively frames the Superhero Registration Act in terms of government control and individual liberty – the same terms that the US government uses to describe its own need to escape the bounds of international society” in the “War on Terror,” disregarding international law (Dittmer 13-14). Hence, it is just as plausible to read Captain America and the anti-registration heroes as analogues for the Bush administration, if one so desires, as they break the law ostensibly to protect the ordinary citizens. This reveals how paradoxical the set-up of the *Civil War* comic books is from the very beginning with regards to the political metaphors at play: Captain America violently defends the right of other *superheroes* to stand above the law. Still, his position is usually read as a metaphor for the ordinary citizens who defend their civil liberties against an overreaching government. Simultaneously, Iron Man pledges to hold superheroes



responsible for their actions, to comply with the “will of the people,” and to make sure that a group of enhanced individuals does not have a monopoly of force.<sup>28</sup> And still, his side is usually identified with the hegemonic use of power by a government stripping its citizens of their democratic rights.

Why the sympathies of readers and critics alike seem to have been so clearly with the anti-registration heroes (a fact also noted by Dittmer 13) is hard to say. Using the “nationalist superhero” (Dittmer) Captain America as the leader of the rebellious superheroes certainly contributed to an exceedingly apologetic view of their actions and ideals. Furthermore, the often unnamed members of the US-American communities that Iron Man’s side purports to speak for do not typically seem to invite the readers’ sympathies within the conventions of the superhero comic genre (see also Dittmer 13). The prime figures of identification within the comics genre are usually the superheroes themselves, with “ordinary people” relegated to the roles of bystanders and side characters. However, *Civil War* does give those communities a voice and above all a visual and narrative presence:

CAPTAIN AMERICA: Let me *go*! Please, I don’t want to *hurt* you . . .  
 UNNAMED CITIZEN 1: Don’t want to *hurt* us? Are you trying to be *funny*?  
 UNNAMED CITIZEN 2: It’s a little late for that, man!  
 [. . .]  
 CAPTAIN AMERICA: Oh my God.  
 FALCON: What’s wrong?  
 CAPTAIN AMERICA: They’re *right*. We’re not fighting for *the people* anymore, Falcon . . . *Look* at us. We’re just *fighting*.  
 (*Civil War* 7, 2007)

*Civil War* shows a community of superheroes at odds with one another, which disrupts the relationship between the superheroes, the state, and the ordinary “people.” When superheroes assume stately power, like Iron Man after *Civil War*, catastrophe ensues; the same goes for situations in which the state tries to interfere with the relationship between the superheroes and their communities, as seen in *Watchmen* and *The Dark Knight Returns*. In such cases, only the community of ordinary people seems to be able to act as a moral corrective to the superheroes gone

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<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, Iron Man’s position could be seen as more democratic according to Miczo, who holds that *Civil War* mirrors a debate from the early days of the US-American republic. Iron Man would stand on the side of “actual representation,” while Captain America propagates “virtual representation” (Miczo 28-29).

wild. However, this radically calls into question the superheroes' ability to act as representatives for their communities. Hence, modern superhero comics discuss the benefits and limits of heroism, and the social relevance of the values it conveys. They engage in a dialogue with their readers, not least of all by representing real-world communities within the narratives. And they confront them with debatable concepts of communal representation, government, civil rights, and individualism, and even with the question of why they read superhero comics in the first place. In doing so, superhero comics truly do link the popular with the political.



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