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# The Avengers: How Superhero Comics Preserve Ruling Class Ideology

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# ***The Avengers*:**
How Superhero Comics Preserve Ruling Class Ideology

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***Introduction***

Most conversations today in regards to media primarily involve films and television shows. This is reflected in the comic book market toward the end of the twentieth century; the decline of sales resulted in the decreased number of comic bookstores around the United States and Canada (Bongco 2000). This decline is attributed in part to the growth of television and film industries which have made comic books less popular and appealing as a form of entertainment. Popular culture and mass media scholars primarily analyze movies and television to understand the relationship between media and the societies that cultivate them, with a particular focus given to deciphering how media operates as an ideological mechanism. Media studies' visual bias leads scholars to focus less on other media forms. Nonetheless, as a medium intended for the mass, comics are not too different from movies and television because they too "cater to popular wishes and demands" (Bongco 2000). In this way, comics play a central role in not merely reflecting reality but constructing it as well.

There are numerous comics genres, such as romance, horror, crime, and fantasy. But superhero comics in particular seem to be the most popular. According to Judge Learned Hand, a superhero is one with "a selfless, pro-social mission, [and has] superpowers – extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills, [one who] has an identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume…and often [has] dual identities." (Coogan 2006) One may ask, what makes superheroes so appealing? From a practical sense, actions that comic book superheroes partake in seem unrealistic (but I am not ruling out such possibilities entirely); considering the laws of science, humans cannot fly like Superman, shoot laser beams out of their eyes like Cyclops, or shoot webs from wrists like Spiderman. Yet,

people of all ages enjoy superhero stories regardless of how seemingly impossible such stories are.

Though comic superhero abilities are of an unrealistic nature, the narratives/stories surrounding them are ideologically laden. These ideologies materialized in how superheroes are presented via the various social statuses (i.e., race, class, gender, sexuality, etc.) they occupy. Thus comics, like with all forms of media, reflect and construct societal ideologies that frequently are unrecognized by the audience and producers of comics. Many scholars have investigated comics through the lens of race, gender, and sexuality, but few have investigated the class dynamics within comics. Although class is reflected in all forms of media, analysis of class within comic books is virtually nonexistent, so it is important to examine both the presence and absence of class in comic books and how the use of class ideologies in comic books help preserve class ideologies in the United States. This study serves to explore not only how superhero comics reflect contemporary class ideology, but also how they construct class reality(ies).

## *Chapter 1: Ideology in Media*

Media images play a significant role in shaping our view of the world, of ourselves, and of our beliefs and values – that is, what we see as good or bad, moral or evil, right or wrong. The radio, television, film, books, and other media provide images and ideas out of which we create our own identities, our sense of self, and our conception of gender, race, sexuality, and class. We are so immersed in media and consumer society that we often do not question ideas disseminated by media because they come off as conceptually 'common' and 'normal'. Media images and ideas provide the frameworks "through which we represent, interpret, understand and 'make sense' of some aspect of social existence." (Dines and Hall 1995:18) Thus media play a significant role in perpetuating dominant ideologies that sustain social relations involving domination and subordination.

### Defining Ideology

Defining ideology has proven to be difficult in the social sciences. Its concept holds such ambiguity in fields outside of the social sciences (e.g. philosophy, politics) that it remains important in social science discourse. Indeed, the operationalization of ideology varies in different fields of study, making it exceedingly difficult to define. Many books on ideology allude to grand theories – theories about the role of ideology in society, specifically in regards to different aspects of the social structure – formulated by well-known individuals such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Antonio Gramsci, Karl Mannheim and Louis Althusser. Gerring (1997: 979) argues, among these scholars who agree, that ideology has one central coherence (or consistency): it is a set of ideas that are "bound together, that belong to one another in a non-random fashion." How they are 'bound together' or inter-correlate and to what extent remains disputed. As Gerring (1997) observed, ideology works in numerous frameworks such as location

(where the ideology is located), subject matter (what the ideology is about), subject (who has ideologies), and position (ideology as a 'hallmark' of specific group in a 'strategic' position). Because of the inherent complexity of the concept of ideology, attempting to construct a definition that is usable for all times, places, and purposes is impractical. (Gerring 1997: 983)

All conceptions of ideology hold that it distorts reality but not in the sense of falsification, but rather as a result of "the action of the dominant social relationships which…do so in a way that is…unconscious so far as [individuals] are concerned" (Bennett 1982: 48). In this sense, ideology involves a process that takes place 'behind our backs', constructing our consciousness in ways of which we are not "immediately aware". Marxists conventionally viewed the concept of ideology in relation to the power and ideas of the dominant group:

> The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling material force is, at the same time, its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (Marx and Engels 1965: 61)

Marxists conceive ideology as a means of transmitting ideas of the economically dominant class to those who are economically subordinate – those who 'lack the means of material production' and therefore 'lack the means of mental production'. Essentially, the consciousness of those who 'lack the means of mental production' – those who are subjected to this transmission of ideas – is "distorted" in a way that allows the perpetuation of existing dominant-subordinate class relationships. (Bennett 1982: 49)

As Stuart Hall (1981) explains, ideologies are not made up of isolated concepts, but are chains of meanings that involve different elements. For instance, in liberal ideology, the concept of 'freedom' is affiliated with individualism and free market. The idea of 'individualism' itself is loaded with various notions attributed by consumer culture. Individuals do not *create* ideology;

ideology is not a "product of individual consciousness or intention. Rather, [individuals] formulate intentions *within ideology*." (Hall, 1981; Dines and Humes 1995: 19) Therefore, ideology precedes the individual and plays an active role in allowing the individual to 'make sense' of or to 'justify' social relations and one's social standing in them. Changing ideology involves a "collective process and practice, not an individual one." This process proceeds unconsciously in a manner that allows ideology to create various forms of social consciousness. Since the process of ideological formation works on the unconscious level, ideology is most effective when individuals are unaware of how they formulate and construct ideas about the world through "ideological premises". Ideology is also most effective when individuals make statements that are seemingly simple descriptions about how things 'must be'. For instance, 'Boys play with trucks and girls play with dolls' seems to be an idea grounded in nature, not in how gender differences have been historically and culturally constructed. Thus, ideology tends to be taken for granted as 'common sense'.

**The Power of Media**

When people think of media, they often think of television, movies, and music, which is reasonable considering these media are the dominant players in delivering visual images and messages to the public. Despite the fact that media have been around for centuries (since the birth of the printing press), it was only after the invention of television and film did academe become interested in studying mass media. During this period, many scholars argued that mass media had a powerful influence over audiences. Curran, Gurevitch, and Wollacott (1982:11) noted that this consensus stemmed from (1) "the creation of mass audiences on a scale that was unprecedented through the application of new technology…to the mass production of communications"; (2) the widely unchallenged view that urbanization and industrialization

fostered a society that was unstable, alienated, and inclined to manipulation; (3) the susceptibility of the industrialized society to manipulation that made individuals 'easy prey' to mass communication; and (4) evidence that mass media could function as a powerful brainwashing agent. These views encouraged that the ruling class used media to manufacture public consent.

However, scholars began to reassess the impact of media during the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, giving rise to a new idea – that mass media had very little power. Empirical enquiries involving experiments and survey techniques showed that people were inclined to "expose themselves to, understand and remember communications selectively" (Curran, Gurevitch, and Wollacott 1982: 12). It was argued that people manipulated mass media, rather than mass media manipulated people. Thus, the media theory maintaining audience passivity was repudiated on the basis that society was a "honeycomb of small groups bound by a rich web of personal ties and dependences," and therefore, had stable group pressures that shielded the individual from the influence of media. (Curran, Gurevitch, and Wollacott 1982: 12).

New theories about media arose over the next decades, some through empirical and mere anecdotal evidence. During the 1970s, however, Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars attacked the idea that media had little power, dismissing empirical communications research as being "uniformly uninteresting" (Curran, Gurevitch, and Wollacott 1982, p. 13). They argued that media played a crucial role in preserving class domination. Indeed, empirical researchers responded to such attacks, arguing that disciplined empirical research had proven theorizing about mass media to be inadequate. Such exchanges between these two traditions continued, but there is consistency in both arguments. Despite empirical studies' claim that mass media have little influence over the audience, their research shows that media do serve a central role in "consolidating and fortifying the values and attitudes" of the audience (Curran, Gurevitch, and

Wollacott 1982:14). Their evidence then supports the Marxist claim that media reinforce "dominant social norms and values that legitimize the social system" (Curran, Gurevitch, and Wollacott 1982: 14).

Political Economy

Political economy theory refers to a system of production and distribution. Although the definition of 'political economy' has evolved throughout its history, I do not have the space to discuss its evolution in this paper. My concern in this paper is with the political economy of communications (or media institutions) – examining "the modes of cultural production and consumption developed within capitalist societies" (Garnham 1979: 123). Studies investigating the power of media by analyzing structures of ownership postulate that media as 'culture-producing industries' can be examined as creations shaped by economic processes. This means that media messages are "determined by the economic base of the [society] in which they are produced." Therefore, in a capitalist based economic society, media are operated to make a profit so they "must cater to the needs of advertisers and produce audience-maximizing products" (hence the large amounts of content involving sex and violence) (Curran, Gurevitch, and Wollacott 1982: 18). Essentially, private ownership of the media translates into power over messages in the media. This is exemplified in the interaction between media organizations and their 'sources'; media have a "symbiotic relationship" with their environment for not only economic support but also for the 'raw materials' necessary to produce their contents. (Curran, Gurevitch, and Wollacott 1982: 20) Since there exists a "mutual dependence between media professionals and the representatives…for other institutions," media are reliant on sources in dominant institutions (i.e., political and economic) for media content, while these institutions rely on media to disseminate their viewpoints and ideas to the public.

Political economists view ideology in the confines of the Marxist concept of false consciousness. False consciousness serves to preserve the power or economic structure in capitalist society by fostering a misrepresentation of dominant relations in the consciousness of the subordinate class. Since class struggle is the underlying source of economic antagonisms, it is crucial to somehow eradicate class awareness from the consciousness of subordinate class in order to preserve the ruling class hegemony. Largely controlled by the ruling class, media play a central role in concealing these antagonisms by reinforcing ruling class ideology. Ideology "becomes a route through which struggle is obliterated." Essentially, the public, which consists largely of subordinate classes, adopt the dominant classes' ideas and values as their own, due in part to media making them popular, normative, and common sense. Thus, media serve to legitimize and further enforce widely accepted ideas by cultivating false consciousness in the subordinate class for the interests of the dominant group that controls the media. (Curran, Gurevitch, and Wollacott 1982; 26) While performing this function, as Murdock and Golding (1977: 37) argue, media maximizes its audience to generate revenues by steering them away from critiquing their own subordinate status and conditioning them to mundane and idiotic "values and assumptions [that] are … familiar and … widely legitimated."

## *Chapter 2: Superhero Comics*

### What is comics and how do we understand images in comics?

In everyday language, the term 'comics' is loosely used to refer to graphic novels or to people who tell jokes. In this sense, the term suggests humorous intent that often does not align with the actual content of the medium. With comics studies growing, defining the term itself is surprisingly difficult. Having to wrestle with the task of distinguishing comics from other similar mediums (e.g. animation, caricature, children's books, and illustrations), such ambiguity has prompted many comics scholars to devise numerous labels – graphic narrative, graphic storytelling, the ninth art – to capture the target of their studies (Heer and Worcester 2009: XIII).

One conventional approach to understanding the term is focusing on the sequential nature of comics – that is, how pictures are put together to tell a story. Scott McCloud (1993) defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer," but essentially boils down his definition to 'sequential art' for simplicity. However, not everyone agrees with McCloud; there is debate about the duality of word and image. McCloud (1993) claims that "text is art and words are images…letters of any language are just a fixed number of shapes." On the other hand, comics creators, such as Dylan Horrocks (creator of the comics *Hicksville*), assert that the importance of words as language should be taken into account when setting a definition, and should not merely allude to the pictorial characteristic of comics. (Lewis 2010: 72)

Regardless of whether one may consider words as image, the bigger question is how do readers understand text and images in comics? McCloud (1993) notes that icons are images (or symbols) "used to represent a person, place, thing or *idea*." Icons encompass symbols used to represent concepts, ideas, and philosophies (e.g. the U.S. flag, the olive branch peace sign, the

Star of David), symbols used to represent language, science, and communication (e.g. the letters of the alphabet, math operations, music notes), and pictures (or images) that resemble something (e.g. a picture of a burger or a baseball bat). However, most icons are not recognizable outside the social contexts that dictate their meaning in particular societal settings. The simplicity of the cartoon image allows for universality; "the more cartoony a face is…the more people [are able] to [remember and] *describe*" it (McCloud 1993: 31). The simplistic characteristic of comics allows for readers to relate more with cartoon characters. McCloud (1993) observes that protagonists in comic books tend to be drawn more simplistic and antagonists are drawn more realistic, which makes readers more likely to identify with the main characters (e.g. heroes) than with villains. McCloud (1993) notes that in the 1960s, superhero comics creators Jack Kirby and Stan Lee "staked out a middle ground of iconic forms with a sense of real about them," making the existence of superheroes seem more possible and realistic. Since my study deals primarily with superheroes and superhero comics, I now turn to defining the superhero and superhero comics.

**What is a superhero and what are superhero comics? Why are they so popular?**

There are numerous comic genres such as romance, horror, crime, and fantasy. But superhero comics in particular are the most popular. According to Judge Learned Hand, a superhero is one with "a selfless, pro-social mission, [and has] superpowers – extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills, [one who] has an identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume…and often [has] dual identities." (Coogan 2006: 30) Most superhero comics share specific characteristics in common: the mission convention (e.g. acting selflessly to aid others), superpowers, and distinct identities (reflected in codenames and costumes). It is important to note that specific characters may be

considered superheroes even though they do not possess all three elements, and heroes from other genres may demonstrate all three elements to some degree but are not regarded as superheroes. (Coogan 2006: 35)

As discussed before, cartoons/comics are drawn simplistically to enable readers to better relate to the characters. But most contemporary superhero comics are drawn slightly more realistic than 'cartoony' comics such as *The Peanuts*, giving a sense of something real about these characters. This suggests that comic artists have quite a bit of power in shaping the way readers may interpret the images.

Mila Bongco (2003: 22) argues that several factors influenced the growth and popularity of comic books. Sequential art is regarded as popular form because it is *different* from other mediums favored by the dominant culture. When its popularity was at its height in the 1940s, the superhero comic book was new and unique. The colors within the comic book were a significant factor in attracting children, in addition to superhero traits that children dreamed of possessing: power, strength, and knowledge (Bongco 2000: 86). By the 1970s, the popularity of superhero comics grew as superheroes underwent commercial transformation; characters were sold as actions figures, masks, posters, ashtrays, board games, and other merchandise, prompting a collection craze (Bongco 2000: 9). As the comic book market grew in the 1980s, production, distribution, and marketing of comics changed; former adolescent comic fans were now adults in positions of power in publishing businesses, and a growing appreciation of other mediums of graphic art (e.g. films, videos, and television) helped change the cultural landscape of comics.

Superhero comic books involve all kinds of fantasies and span a wide "range of themes from moral conflicts to combat stories."(Bongo 2000: 91) Since most superheroes have dual identities (one of which is the masked hero, and the other is the ordinary citizen), it makes being

a superhero seem possible for any common individual. The superhero narrative typically involves a character or a group of characters facing a mystery or dilemma with violence. Women are typically rescued by the tough, honorable heroes. Fight scenes are usually elaborate but almost always ends with the hero as the winner. The superhero story is essentially rather predictable and formulaic. (Bongo 2000: 91) However, readers retain this 'willing suspension of disbelief' despite the predictability of the narrative. Even though Superman, Batman, and Spiderman almost always triumph, readers remain captivated by the suspense of the next adventure. Thus, the predictable and innovative natures of superhero comics partially explain why individuals take pleasure in reading these texts.

People of all ages enjoy superhero stories. But this seems strange since comics were originally designed to appeal to kids, so why do former adolescent superhero comics readers remain committed comics fans? Why do people of all ages enjoy superhero stories regardless of how seemingly impossible such stories are? Given that superhero stories are so formulaic, why do they remain popular and are reproduced via other media forms? Part of the reason could be that reading comics is a way to reconnect with one's childhood (that is, if one was a fervent comics reader as a child). But there are people who begin reading comics later in their lives and find this form of media great entertainment despite its seemingly juvenile appeal. Perhaps reading comics allows individuals to tap into the inner child that they never knew existed or wished they knew better. But of course, there *must* be more to reading comics than this: comics seem to have both an element of fantasy and an element of 'reality' that allows one to escape from the confines of the dull, alienated life of the working individual, and simultaneously believe that this 'awesome', eventful, interesting world portrayed in the comics is possible. This suggests

that comics are different from the experience acquired from watching television, reading a book, or listening to music.

**Brief History of Superhero Comics**

The first comic book in the U.S. was published in 1917 from the Saalfield Publishing Company. It was merely a collection of newspaper comic strip reprints in black-and-white, formatted like the Sunday comic section of the newspapers. It was not until 1933 when the comic book format we know today appeared – in full-color and in magazine layout. However, the comic book was still a compilation of comic strips from newspapers and, therefore, had no extensive narrative featuring specific characters, nor did it have original work. By 1938, compiling and reprinting comic strips had become common. But teenagers, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, soon created an original character called Superman in *Action Comics #1* (June 1938). Their comic book quickly became the template for many superhero comics to come, expanding the superhero comic book genre into one of the most popular, largest, and successful comic book genres. (Bongo 2000: 95) But according to Duncan and Smith (2009: 222), aspects of the superhero – the costume, the power, the dual identity –existed before Superman. The earliest superheroes were constructions of three different adventure-narrative: the science-fiction superman (e.g. Frankenstein), the pulp *übermensch* (which refers to Nietzsche's idea of 'the overman'; e.g. Tarzan), and the dual identity vigilante (e.g. Robin Hood). See Table 1 for a visual typology of the major characters in these three streams. Superman is the culmination of these three traditions and was the first to possess all such characteristics, laying the groundwork for future superheroes to come.

Table 1. Peter Coogan (2006) traces the development of the comic book superhero as a derivative of three streams of adventure-narrative figures. (Duncan and Smith 2009: 223)

| Science Fiction Supermen | Pulp Übermensch | Dual Identity Vigilantes |
|---|---|---|
| | | Robin Hood 1377 |
| Frankenstein 1818 | | |
| | | Nick of the Woods 1837 |
| | Nick Carter 1886 | |
| | | Scarlet Pimpernel 1905 |
| John Carter 1912 | Tarzan 1912 | |
| | | The Gray Seal 1914 |
| | | Zorro 1919 |
| Hugo Danner 1930 | | |
| | | The Shadow 1931 |
| | | The Lone Ranger 1933 |
| | Doc Savage 1933 | The Spider 1933 |
| | | The Bat 1934 |
| | | Dr. Occult 1935 |
| | | Green Hornet 1936 |
| | | The Phantom 1936 |
| | | The Clock 1936 |
| Superman 1938 | | The Batman 1939 |

Generally, the Golden Age of comic books began in 1938, but it was not until almost a year later when the number of superhero characters and comic book sales increased immensely. As Stan Lee of Marvel Comics recalls, new superheroes were born almost every week (Bongo 2000: 96). In 1939, there were merely fifty comic titles, but by 1941, there were 168 and more than eighty percent of them involved superhero adventures. Comic book popularity skyrocketed during the war years because the country's need for patriotic heroes provided superheroes with new enemies like the Nazi and Japanese (Bongo 2000: 96). For instance, Captain America emerged during World War II as a hero both of *and* for the nation, embodying the American identity by "connecting political projects of American nationalism, internal order, and foreign policy…with the scale of the individual." Because he is explicitly characterized as an American superhero (i.e. by his name), he is both a symbol of the "idealized American nation" and "a defender of the American status quo." (Dittmer 2010: 627) The war also introduced elements of realism in comic books in that publishers used historical events to construct comic book narratives. However, the Golden Age of superhero comics ended in 1949 due in part to the

conclusion of World War II which left comic book narratives and superheroes without any villains to stave off from conquering the nation and the world. (Bongo 2000: 97) Only Superman, Wonder Woman, and Batman survived during the 1950s when comic books shifted their narratives to crime, horror, and gore. But because of the rise of interest in 'horror and gore' comics, the Comics Code Authority was established in 1954 to restrict the content of comic books. The Code is a "voluntary self-regulation process", which means comic book publishers voluntarily construct comic book content deemed appropriate by the Comics Code Authority. (Duncan and Smith 2009: 39) DC and Marvel were two of the few comic book publishers to survive the new code standards and attacks from those who argued that comics encouraged juvenile delinquency. (Bongo 2000: 98)

In 1956, original comic book superheroes were revived and updated for a new audience. Flash was re-born and re-costumed, appearing in the comic book *Showcase #4,* October 1956 (which marked the beginning of the Silver Age). Green Lantern returned in *Showcase #22*, October 1959, and then a team of superheroes called the Justice League of America appeared in *The Brave and the Bold #28,* March 1960. Soon, characters of Norse mythology, such as Thor (first appeared in 1962), were added. Golden Age superheroes such as Captain America and the Submariner were revived. Superheroes were brought back in teams as a means to revive them all at once. Marvel published significantly more comic books than DC, but DC received more attention due to the Batman television series in the 1960s. The U.S. went 'bat-crazy' almost immediately after its premiere in 1966, consequently propelling sales of all superhero comic books, particularly Batman comic books. (Bongo 2000, p. 98) By the 1980s, Marvel and DC continued to launch new superheroes, but these new characters took on a new concept of the superhero. The new superheroes were "more mortal and more complex, especially in their

psychological constitution" (Bongco 2000, p. 100). Comic book publishers had begun to steer from the Comics Code and advertised many of their comics as 'Suggested for Mature Readers'.

Despite the introduction of numerous characters throughout the years, Batman and Superman remain the most popular superheroes today with a wide range of audiences. Batman and Superman, along with many other superheroes, have changed, even though most of the original superhero concepts were established between 1938 and 1943. In the next section, I examine the specific characteristics that these superheroes possess and why they appeal to audience.

**Characteristics of the Superhero**

As alluded earlier, three main features characterize superheroes: (1) mission; (2) powers; and (3) identity. The mission is fundamental to the superhero genre because a character who does not act selflessly to help others "is not heroic and therefore [is] not a hero" (Coogan 2006: 30). Conventionally, the superhero's mission is to aid "those in need and fight evil" (Duncan and Smith 2009: 226). As expressed in Siegel's *Action Comics* #1 (June 1938), Superman's mission is to be a "champion of the oppressed…sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need", i.e. to use his powers for the good of humanity (Coogan 2006: 30). Superman's mission does not differ from many other familiar heroes like pulp fiction hero Doc Savage in *Man of Bronze* (1964), whose "purpose was to go here and there, from one end of the world to another, looking for excitement and adventure, striving to help those who needed help, punishing those who deserved it" (Coogan 2006: 31).

The second distinguishing element of the superhero is power that involves extraordinary skills and abilities significantly more superior than those of ordinary humans. One of the reasons why superhero comics work better on printed medium is that many of the superpowers –

shooting laser beams from the eyes or casting lightning bolts from fingertips – are visually appealing in print. On the contrary, Batman technically does not have superpowers, but he is incredibly athletic, has tremendously high endurance, and has phenomenal combat skills; additionally, his intelligence allows him to be the world's greatest detective. His enormous amount of wealth also allows him the latest technology to help complete his mission. As Duncan and Smith observed (2009: 227), "the more awesome the superhero's powers, the more necessary it is, for purposes of dramatic narrative, that the hero have a limitation." Superman's weakness is kryptonite. Many DC superheroes followed the Superman model. For instance, Martian Manhunter becomes unconscious near an open flame, and Green Lantern's power ring is ineffective on things that are yellow. Other limitations are rooted in their personalities, such as pride (i.e. Thor), addictiveness (i.e. Iron Man), and self-doubt (Spiderman). (Duncan & Smith 2009: 227)

The third distinguishing characteristic is identity. The superhero identity comprises a codename and costume. As explained by Duncan and Smith (2009, p. 227), the superhero name is generally related to the character's powers (i.e. Flash), attitude (i.e. Daredevil), or role (i.e. Captain America). Superheroes usually have dual identities that contrast with their civilian identities which often project some kind of weakness, such as cowardice. However, not every superhero possesses a dual identity. For instance, the civilian identities of the Fantastic Four are well known by the public.

The costume is central to the superhero's identity and is one of the most identifiable features of the superhero. Even though Superman was not the first costumed character, his costume separates him from heroes not classified as superheroes (e.g. pulp heroes – preceded the superhero and do not have superpowers; pulps were cheap illustrated magazines printed during

the 1930s and 1940s). A pulp hero's costume does not usually represent the character's identity. Shadow's costume (a slouch hat, black cloak, and red scarf), for instance, does not emblematize his identity. Superman's costume (particularly his "S"), on the other hand, proclaims his identity. Similarly, Batman's costume represents him as a bat man, and Spiderman's costume represents him as a spider man. Furthermore, according to McCloud, color serves a crucial role in the iconicity of the costume. McCloud argues that the iconicity of the superhero costume follows his theory of "amplification through simplification" (1993: 30). He explains that "de-emphasizing the appearance of the physical world in favor of the idea of form [allows] the cartoon [to place] itself in the world of concepts" (McCloud 1993: 41). The superhero costume projects a simplified idea of the character embodied in the colors and design of the costume because it "removes the specific details of a character's ordinary appearance" (Coogan 2006: 32). Most superhero costumes are of bright, primary colors, making the costume more iconic because primarily colors are "less than expressionistic" but more simplistic, and also have a "tendency to emphasize the shape of objects", as McCloud shows in his book *Understanding Comics* (1993: 188). Since costume colors are the same from panel to panel, they come to "symbolize the characters in the mind of the reader" (McCloud 1993: 188).

***Chapter 3: Linking Superhero Comics to Ruling Class Ideology***

Most scholarly research on comics focus primarily on investigating them as an art form, its psychological effects on the audience, and its effectiveness as an educational and literary tool. Considering that comics combine words and pictures in a rather unique way, its interpretation can be multivalent (McAllister et al 2001). How printed words and pictures are combined within small panels (windows that display each image) makes studying comics ideologically so interesting. Though readers have interpretative flexibility, they are also subject to existing meanings (e.g., stereotypes) that illustrators use to construct their art (McAllister et al 2001).

Comics continuously change in accordance with demographic shifts in order to remain commercially viable; they do so by perpetuating certain widely accepted dominant ideologies that appeal to their audience. Bongco (2000) contends that earlier superhero comics comfortably positioned readers as white, middle-class American males and ensured their ease in making sense of the ideological messages within superhero narratives. She notes that the 'best superheroes' were literate, middle-class, white males. However, she, along with many other scholars, observes that comics are now choosing to construct narratives on social issues that counter the dominant ideological view. For instance, Andres Romero-Jodar (2011) explores how Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and *V for Vendetta* reflect avant-garde movements such as Cubism and Futurism, and how they rebel against bourgeois social class ideology. Jodar argues that Moore's comics portray a complex world where different, sometimes clashing, discourses become important in understanding reality; readers often find themselves unable to identify with any one character because the collective stories of these individual characters are so intertwined that they reflect an intricate, but real, world. Thus, Moore's work seems to highlight that reality can only be understood through multiple realities. Jodar also contends that Moore uses comic art form "to

offer an escape from fascist discourses…[and] thus...aim to shape a more tolerant society by making the readership consider the representation of the world itself" (2001: 45). He refers to Bertolt Brecht's belief that 'art is not a mirror to reflect the world, but a hammer with which to shape it.' Jodar argues that Moore uses art for the cause of changing the world and reshaping reality. Furthermore, he also maintains that *Watchmen* depicts the "catastrophic outcome of the imposition of one person's view over a complete community…[resulting] in the death of freedom…[presenting] a world that is collapsing under the grand narratives of capitalism and patriarchal ideology." Dominant ideas go unquestioned because they operate as common sense. Moore attempts to draw attention to these unquestioned societal faults by making them visible to the reader.

Jamie Hughes (2006) claims that superheroes are "placed on pedestals as champions of justice and perfection…outside of the realm of ideology…[they are not] controlled" by forces of class, religion, education, and politics. Hughes applies this notion only to traditional superheroes, such as Superman, Batman, and Green Lantern, but he remarks that the Watchmen choose to take on superhero responsibilities "for much more mundane reasons – money, power, fame, [and] to promote their own ideology." He draws a line between the Watchmen and Golden Age superheroes (e.g. Superman and Batman) to highlight that the Watchmen are not outside of ideology. In making this distinction, Hughes reveals that the Watchmen are in fact immersed within ideology. Existing outside ideology means being exempt from being socially involved; a superhero is certainly tied to issues of identity, power, and other elements of dominant societal ideologies. Even though a superhero may not be recognized as a citizen, the superhero is essentially tied to the society he or she protects.

Wolf-Meyer explores the relationship between the law and the structure of class systems in superhero narratives. He explains that even though superheroes may be outside of hegemonic capitalism, they can only exist "through the production of legal and capital spaces produced by capitalist practices." (2006: 188) Heroes must be "explicit agents of hegemonic capitalism" in order to maintain their position. As denoted in Iron Man comics, efforts of capitalism protect him from the law, which reflects the interrelationship between capitalism and the law that exists in society. In "The Power Elite" (1956), C. Wright Mills calls attention to members of the power elite who occupy the dominant positions in military, economic, and political institutions and whose decisions (or lack of decisions) make a gargantuan impact in society, especially since they have so much control in all three institutions; they are essentially in command of all major organizations of society. Since their power extends to seemingly different entities, these institutions share ideologies that help sustain each other and work in favor of the ruling group. Iron Man exemplifies a member of the power elite who enjoys the privilege of legal protection that stems from his elite status. Batman, on the other hand, is not protected from the law. The difference between Iron Man and Batman is that Iron Man is an appropriate representative of Stark Industries' concerns, as opposed to Batman who does not suitably represent Wayne Enterprises, considering his status as an urban legend.

Superhero comics reflect how capitalistic hegemony relies on "economic constraints to limit the potential of its citizens." (Wolf-Meyer 2006: 203) The ordinary citizen needs to be unaware of the power structure to allow the power elite to remain in the highest rung of the hierarchy. The ruling class (or the power elite) ensures its position by controlling the production of virtually everything, especially of media that convey messages necessary to preserve the

hegemonic ideology. Thus, the ruling class relies on and controls the reproduction of ideas and values favorable to the dominant group.

Jeff Williams (1994) argues that even though earlier comics (e.g. Superman comics) reflect and perpetuate American ideology (a synonym for ruling class ideology in the U.S.), subsequent comics became increasingly more 'subversive' as more 'underground comix' were created and released. Williams (1994: 133) defines 'subversion' as "anything that is counter-hegemonic" – that is, anything outside of hegemony or dominant ideology. Hegemony is sustained through reproduction of ideas carried by culture, language, and media and essentially pushes for the transmission of such ideas to the subordinate class through these elements of society. Superman is a classic example of a reproduction of bourgeois hegemony. The character serves as a symbol of the United States, representing "Truth, Justice, and the American Way", as the cover of *Superman* #53 reads. Spiderman, although less of a symbol of the U.S. than Superman, works to restore the hegemonic bourgeois order. Williams concludes that comics can be divided into two major categories: mainstream and independent comics. Superhero comics, released particularly by DC and Marvel, are widely considered as mainstream/bourgeois since they tend to reproduce hegemonic ideas and "present values considered important in [capitalist] societ[ies]" (DiFazio 1973: 231).

**Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how superhero comics perpetuate class ideology that contributes to the preservation of white male economic elite supremacy. I look particularly at *The Avengers* because The Avengers is a team composed of many characters of different powers and backgrounds, making the comic book suitable in studying how a wide range of ideologies are used in comics. I analyzed comics published in each decade when the comics

were released: 1960s (#1, #7, #18, #41, #66), 1970s (#89, #135), 1980s (#194, #198), 1990s (#23, #24), and 2000s (#8). This allowed me to perform comparative analysis of how specific ideologies are used throughout history to preserve white male elite supremacy. Comics researchers seldom investigate how comic book superheroes perpetuate class ideology upon which my study focuses. But I look at ideas about gender and race not merely because all social divisions work together to sustain each other but because gender and race ideology serve a vital function which will be discussed later.

I used grounded theory, systematically gathering and analyzing data. The core feature of this approach involves constant comparative analysis. Essentially, theory may be formulated from the collected data, or, if existing theories seem applicable to the area of interest, then they can be expanded and modified as more data is collected. (Strauss and Corbin 1994) Grounded theory does not involve a formal, rigid coding system. Rather, features of the methodology include: simultaneously gathering and analyzing data; detecting fundamental themes or patterns emerging from the data; creating analytic codes developed from data itself; and integrating codes into theoretical framework. I chose to use grounded theory because it is ideal for analyzing social relationships largely neglected in many studies concerning contextual factors that affect individuals' lives. (Crooks 2001: 18)

Since all texts are subject to numerous varying interpretations depending on the social position of readers, it is pertinent to mention that results of this research may not account for all occurrences, for I, too, take rules and codes for granted and may fail to see how my own ideology influences how I interpret the data.

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## *Chapter 4: Data Analysis*

### The Hollywood Narrative in Superhero Comics

Before discussing ideas about class in *The Avengers*, it is crucial to elaborate on the observations presented here. Comics are susceptible to change due to shifts in history because the narratives often reflect historical circumstances during the time of their publication. Such is shown in several issues of *The Avengers* involving the protagonists facing communist enemies and racial tension within the country. However, not only do historical circumstances cause comics to evolve, the gradual adoption of Hollywood narratives led them to use less obvious ideological forms. That is, the comic narrative begins within a state of equilibrium (or order), then proceeds to a disruption of the equilibrium by an event, and followed by superheroes remedying the disruption to restore equilibrium (Strinati 2000: 29). That is, the narrative follows a "linear, cause and effect sequence which ensures the restoration of social order" (Strinati 2000: 30). In the superhero comics genre, the stories often start with the world in equilibrium (before the villain executes his or her plot), the villain uses conflict (either by threatening the public or struggling for power with the heroes), and then the superheroes work to thwart by defeating the villain. Though superhero comics use the Hollywood narrative, their efforts do not always have a happy ending. Each comic issue may end with a cliff-hanger to entice readers to purchase the next issue of the comics series. Nonetheless, the storyline typically follows this linear sequence of events that ends with the heroes defeating the villain, regardless of whether the villain is defeated in the beginning, middle, or end of the issue.

Cook (1985: 212-15) outlines two other primary features of the Hollywood narrative system. One of such features is realism, which encompasses two things. The first is 'verisimilitude', which refers to the creation within media (in this case, comic books) of worlds

with seemingly realistic characters, locations, and time scales. This element of 'verisimilitude' is not limited to only Hollywood movie and superhero comic genres; it is also exhibited in other genres that are obviously unrealistic such as science fiction. Considering *The Avengers*, the setting of the series tend to take place in cities, making their world seem believable. The second aspect of 'realism' is the narrative's stress on the important role of 'human' agency in moving the narrative forward by linking cause with effect. The hero is the most important agent of the narrative because s/he ensures the restoration of bourgeois order. The other feature of this narrative is 'closure' through the restoration of order regardless of whether or not that order is different from the original. The restored order is attributed to the defeat of the villain; all questions in the end are answered and the villain is gone once defeated – hence, no ambiguity. (However, many times the villain's presence is prolonged to maintain readership interest.)

The only difference between comic books like *The Avengers* and individual films is that there is only one Hollywood narrative in films, as opposed to comic books which have multiple of such narratives to ensure the continuance of the comics series, but all narratives are fundamentally the same. Even though every villain encountered usually has different powers and disrupts social order in different ways, the disruption of social equilibrium is usually restored through the same means – that is, combat against the villain.

**Differences in *The Avengers* Comics Issues Released in Varying Decades**

Since the boom in mass media production, mass media have been used as means of conveying messages to the public, particularly messages that align with hegemonic ideology. Certainly, ideas promoted by the ruling class change in accordance with historical social context in which they are constructed. For instance, mass media were used to convey and shore up

support for the political position of the ruling class in the 1960s regarding the Vietnam War. During this period, *The Avengers* conveyed ideas about non-capitalists in Asia.

Hegemonic ideologies are less obvious in the later issues of *The Avengers*, due perhaps to the fact that earlier issues' portrayals of the Avengers as more extraordinary individuals with exaggerated descriptions of their abilities changed to their current presentation as more human-like and sentimental with less descriptive language in the narrative. Looking particularly at Issue #7: Captain America beats people up at the gym as a routine workout and has 'astounding speed'; Iron Man is described as 'the handsome millionaire' who has 'dramatic glistening form'; and of course, the Wasp is 'wonderful'. However, such descriptions in the narrative cease to exist in the issues released in the 1970s.

Additionally, comics released in later years do not have the same action-packed stories as the earlier ones. In the first issue of *The Avengers*, there are far more stories involving plans to defeat the villain, Loki, and the side interactions (e.g. exchanged comments about how handsome Thor is, Fig. 1) between characters are minimal. Later issues involve more stories about the interactions between the characters and the individual characters' pasts, and less about fighting villains. Furthermore, later issues give readers less flexibility for imagination because the comics have more filler panels that tell the readers how they should interpret the story, while earlier issues have fewer filler panels, allowing readers less rigid interpretation of the narrative and more flexibility in imagination. Because of the smaller number of filler panels, earlier issues are thus more action-packed and have a content-heavier storyline.

With the gradual shift to the Hollywood narrative system, *The Avengers* comics add more details, specifically more character development, making the comics more believable and human-like, and thus easier for the reader to identify with. In such sense, the transformation of

the comic series plays with realism (or more specifically, verisimilitude) to better target the desired audience. In the later issues of the comics series, the theme of love becomes a prominent feature in order to cater to the youth, for the youth market is an important revenue stream for the comic industry. Strinati (2000: 19) notes that the audience is more inclined to be attracted to 'realistic' and 'mature portrayals of serious themes' emerging from the Hollywood narrative, a more humanistic depiction of superheroes. Furthermore, in the later issues of *The Avengers*, its narratives are increasingly centered on individual characters and their stories (e.g. Vision's identity crisis and the conflict he faces involving losing his wife to his brother). Strinati (2000: 32) explains that the Hollywood narrative is characterized by "psychological causality", which means individual characters must have 'a bundle of qualities, or traits' that influence how they overcome obstacles. This essentially ensures comic narratives to be more complex and tantalizing to the reader and viewer.

The Hollywood narrative style suggests that comics are products of standardization that have ideological implications (Strinati 2000: 34). Some (Hughes 2006; McAllister et al. 2001) argue that the ideology of social order in the narrative reflects and perpetuates bourgeois interests by ensuring conformity and obedience to their dominance in society. Thus, the perpetuation of this ideology via comic narratives plays a role in maintaining hierarchical class relations by helping to "prevent the prevailing distribution of power from being disturbed" (Strinati 2000: 35).

**Gender & Race in the Absence of Class Struggle**

The *idea* of class struggle is almost (if not completely) nonexistent in the comic series. It is no coincidence that it is difficult to find depictions and narratives of class struggle in comics. Before I delve into the reasons for the absence of class, I turn to how the images of 'gender' and 'race' in *The Avengers* tie into class (more specifically, how they help sustain the dominance of

the ruling class). The reason why I put quotation marks around the terms gender and race is that these ideas are social constructions; gender and race differences are often mistaken to be defined by biological factors because individuals are born with differences to which people attach social meanings.

Gender Portrayals

Despite the differences between issues from different decades, certain ideas remain consistent in preserving the position of the dominant group. In particular, female characters are portrayed as having attributes that tend to be unfavorable. For instance, women are supposedly love-sick, emotional, and manipulative. They are weak, are consistently in need of rescue, and are incapable to exert strength. In the first issue (1963), when the superheroes are being summoned to help contain the Hulk's supposedly uncontrollable behavior, the Wasp exclaims that Thor is 'gorgeous' and wonders how to make him notice her. Ant-Man scolds her for being a 'love-sick female'. The Wasp's remark about how 'gorgeous' Thor is does not add to the story, but merely suggests that not only is Thor handsome, but also that the Wasp is unable to focus on the mission (protecting the public from Hulk's supposed destructive behavior), and is thus incompetent in aiding the team to success. Additionally, because the idea that Thor is handsome is established by a female character instead of by a male character or even by the narrators/creators (who are male individuals), it reflects the norms of heterosexuality and gender. As the Wasp is depicted to be easily swayed by love interest, she is also shown to be emotionally sensitive. In Issue #194 (1980), a man, named Selbe, had escaped from a supposed insane asylum and refuged to the Stark mansion where the Avengers resided. The Wasp empathizes with Selbe and is rebuked for allowing her emotions to cloud her judgment of this character. When Selbe is taken away from the mansion by men sent to retrieve him, the Wasp decides to

investigate this seemingly suspicious case but is consequently held captive in what turns out to be a training academy to turn people into pawns (or 'goons') for super villains (Issue #195, 1980). The rest of the Avengers go to the institution to rescue her; the Black Knight remarks that the Wasp "looks so helpless, so *lifeless*," which aligns with the notion of female weakness and incompetency to self-defend; additionally, the female is in constant need of male assistance (Issue #195, 1980).

Occurrences of love and female sexuality seem to be more frequent in the later issues of the comic series. In Issue #256 (1985), the Wasp's 'casual' attire at the Stark Mansion is rather revealing and her mannerisms seem sexually inviting, even though she does not explicitly verbalize anything sexual (Fig. 5; Fig. 6). Additionally, in Issue #23 (1999), Firestar, although a seemingly simple gesture, extends herself to Justice by kissing him on the cheek. Not only are there female characters depicted to have flirtatious behavior, there are also female characters who possess 'super powers' that lure men to fall victim to their sexual attraction. In Issue #8 (2005), one of Spider-Woman's powers is releasing a pheromone that causes sexual attraction. As for love and romance, the marriage between Vision and the Scarlet Witch is merely a filler story (Issue #137, 1975) but becomes a partial source of conflict between two members of the Avengers in Issue #23 (1999). Thus, the later issues of the comics series seem to involve increasingly more personal matters between the superheroes instead of matters of public protection from villains. Issue #23 (1999) alludes to Vision's identity crisis about not being an actual human, in addition to his ex-wife, the Scarlet Witch, falling in love with Vision's brother, Wonder Man (Fig. 7). In fact, Issue #23 does not introduce any villains, but merely refers to Vision's pain about losing the Scarlet Witch to his own brother.

Female characters are manipulative, alluding to ideas of female sin – it is no coincidence that such ideas originate from the Bible, considering that religion (specifically Christianity) is heavily intertwined in the ideologies regarding all social divisions. In Issue #7 (1964), the Enchantress, a villain who is banished from Asgard and exiled to Earth, and her tricking Thor to drink a special brew that propels him to attack the Avengers mirrors the story of Adam and Eve (Fig. 2). Indeed, many individuals blame Eve for giving Adam the forbidden fruit, and even believe that the serpent itself is female. Female villains are not the only characters that are manipulative. It is no coincidence that the Scarlet Witch's power is hex and Spider-Woman's pheromones evoke sexual arousal, reinforcing the idea of female trickery. The Scarlet Witch, one of the earlier Avengers, has the ability to alter reality and manipulate probability through hexes. However, her power to hex is very limited, reflecting her minimal contribution to fighting villains. In Issue #18 (1965), the Scarlet Witch finds herself held captive and the rest of the Avengers (all male) are to rescue her by exerting their strength – an ability that all male characters in *The Avengers* seem to have. Both the Scarlet Witch and the Wasp are portrayed as weak – if not physically weak, then emotionally weak (Fig. 3; Fig. 4). By portraying female characters in this light, *The Avengers* differentiate females from their male counterparts – the bad from the good, the deviant from the normal, the subordinate from the dominant. Since *The Avengers* possesses this element of realism ('verisimilitude'), their projection of established gender ideology not only reinforces but also constructs a reality of what seems to be the nature of the female sex.

The male superheroes are depicted as strong leaders who contribute significantly more in combat than do their female colleagues. Reinforcing these stereotypical images of females and males in this rank order perpetuates "normative" gender roles. By establishing the polarity of

both genders, portraying the male as ambitious, aggressive, and competent not only suggests what the 'normal' male should be, but also legitimizes these personality characteristics (ambitious, aggressive, and competent). These male attributes are essentially deemed ideal in a society that praises patriarchal capitalism to a significant degree because it makes it psychologically easier to exploit subordinate classes.

Race Portrayals

Since the earlier issues were published during the Vietnam War (1955-1975), they are heavily nationalistically biased, consequently placing non-American peoples in a negative light. In Issue #18 (1965), the Avengers are lured to Sin-Cong, a communist-ruled puppet state under the tyranny of the Commissar (who was eventually discovered to be a robot). The people of Sin-Cong are guaranteed protection from the imperialists by the state if they paid taxes. They are depicted as brainwashed victims of the communist rule and exploited by the Commissar, a large man partnered with a small, scrawny man, both of whom look like Fu Manchu (Fig. 8), the Asian villain who has served as an archetype of the evil criminal with his infamous mustache (named after his name) since the 1930s. The Commissar tricks the Avengers into going to Sin-Cong to help free the state from 'the Reds' and challenges the Avengers to individual matches while holding the Scarlet Witch captive. Since this issue was served to be propaganda during the time of its release, while communist states were portrayed as evil and wrong, the U.S. was portrayed as good and favorable, and such positive portrayal was enhanced by Captain America's image. Captain America is the very embodiment of all American values – leadership, strength, and moral soundness, to name a few. It is no coincidence that Captain America is white and blonde – a widely recognized image of the common American (it is also no coincidence that all of the Avengers who look human are 'white'). Since the communist dictator looks like an abnormally

large Fu Manchu (Fu Manchu is the icon of an evil Asian villain), his image contrasts starkly with Captain America's image (blonde, white, and proportionally sized), along with the rest of the Avengers. With the communist dictator depicted as a large individual and the Avengers depicted as average human sized individuals, the Asian villain is seen as a deviant while the Avengers are 'normal'. Furthermore, the Asian villain is eventually discovered to be a robot controlled by a small, weak, coward communist.

With the Avengers ultimately defeating the communist dictator, such implies that capitalism will always be better than and will always defeat communism, consequently legitimizing the existence of class division in all societies. Behind this justification of capitalism lies the idea of the American Dream, which is often endorsed by the Hollywood narrative (Strinati 2000: 34). Thus, propagandizing against the absence of class division suggests that the American Dream can only exist in societies with class division, and having good American values as the Avengers do (particularly Captain America and Iron Man) will allow individuals to ascend the social hierarchy. Such belief in this idea of having good American values fosters false consciousness among subordinate class groups who come to see the interest of the dominant class groups as their own.

Because the earlier issues of *The Avengers* were published during the Vietnam War, they, along with many other forms of media, served as propaganda against communism and peoples who lived in enemy states. Depicting the villain as a communist dictator who exploits citizens is both a means of promoting capitalism and a means of social criticism against communism. Furthermore, deeming communism evil and morally wrong separates it from capitalism, consequently deeming capitalism good and morally just by default. This negative portrayal of communism serves to justify domination and exploitation of others, essentially justifying

colonialism and domination of subordinate groups of people. Indeed, historical circumstances no longer prompted the creators of the comic series to bring in political themes. During the 1980s, matters of race within the U.S. became an additional source of conflict for the Avengers. Affirmative action and racial quotas introduced racial tensions, and the manner in which the Avengers handle having to accept a new member because of a racial quota and facing public rallies for more African-American superheroes is of tolerance. This tolerance demonstrated by the Avengers reflects the American attitude towards non-white peoples. Tolerance of non-white individuals may supposedly be a means of appeasing racialized groups, but tolerance also separates them from white individuals. Readers are always reminded of the racial difference of non-white characters (and female characters are consistently differentiated as well) because non-white characters must be tolerated. Reminding the readers of the racial difference of an African-American superhero shapes audience perception of race, for the portrayal of racialized individuals in the comics prompts readers to differentiate themselves from socially constructed groups in which they 'do not belong'. In other words, racial matters in comics encourage readers to label and abide by existing racial understandings and ways of operating in society

Not only does the comic series attack peoples outside the U.S., it depicts non-'white' people within the country as a source of conflict. This portrayal of non-'white' people as a source of conflict reflects 'white' people's attempt to degrade 'others' for personal gain, mirroring the capitalist activity of domination justified by placing capitalism in a positive light. Dehumanizing the 'other' and sustaining the good image of capitalism keeps capitalism and the domination it reigns over others alive.

In Issue #23(1999), protesters rally in front of the Stark mansion demanding for more 'black Avengers', posing as added trouble and somewhat of a nuisance along with the super

villains they must face to protect the public. One inconsistent detail that appeared in this issue is that the Avengers claim they "never had racial quotas for membership" and remark that they "shouldn't start now", utterly ignoring the fact that they had to abide by a racial quota in Issue #181. They acknowledge that "there are black heroes who've served with distinction with the team – Photon, the Falcon, War Machine" as a means to justify that black superheroes *have* had the privilege to work with the team, and the times they have had black superheroes work with them are enough.

In Issue #181 (1979), a man who calls himself 'the government' announces that the team has to be cut down to seven core members to sustain their priority privileges, and introduces the Falcon, an African-American superhero whose "only powers are flying and rapping with birds", as described by Hawkeye when he finds that he is not selected as a core member of the team. 'The Government' explains that since the Avengers are sanctioned by the government, they have to abide by government policies, which includes 'equal opportunities for minorities'. This occurrence fosters racial tension between the Falcon and the rest of the Avengers (with the exception of Captain America who maintains his image of good American values by "vouch[ing] for the Falcon" and assuring that "he's a good man"). Having to fill the racial quota enforced by the government, the Falcon is depicted as a 'token' and an undesirable member of the team who was "forced on [them] by the government" and has to be tolerated. In Issue #194 (1980), the Falcon decides to leave the team when Wonder Man gets reinstated, and comments that "maybe [resigning will] ease some of the tension [he seems] to have brought in with [him]". Captain America responds to the Falcon that he doesn't "think anyone really noticed," ignoring that race is a problem (essentially demonstrating a phenomenon of color-blind racism). Nevertheless, Falcon's racial status makes it difficult for Captain America and the rest of the Avengers to fight

super villains (specifically those from other countries) because it is not possible to preserve this image of the elite group with an individual who does not abide by the conventional image of an elite in this elite group. The act of 'Othering' involves placing people with specific biological differences in subordinate groups, so they are not viewed as equals but rather inferiors in need of controlling. If a member of the subordinate class is permitted in the Avengers, this person is portrayed in a manner that reinforces widely-accepted stereotypes about his/her group. For instance, the Falcon was born in Harlem, New York City, the 'hub' of African-American people in the U.S.; the Black Panther is from Wakanda, a fictional nation located in Africa (but the exact location in Africa is unknown). These superhero characters are created to agree with widely-accepted ideas and simultaneously enforce these ideas to further separate people with 'black skin' from people who have 'white skin'. 'Accepting' a member of the subordinate group into a power elite group causes justifications for 'Othering' and racialization because such justifications are necessary to preserve capitalism, or at least the good image of capitalism. Without these justifications and without the capitalism's good image, the justification for dominating the subordinate would cease to exist.

**Class Struggle**

In many ways I have addressed how *The Avengers* helps to sustain class ideology in society but I now want to delve deeper into how the constant battles between superheroes and villains exemplify class struggle and power. The villains generally want to attain power by defeating the Avengers. The Avengers do not explicitly declare that they are fighting for power as well because they are already in the position of power; they merely have to defend their place in society by facing the threats of and battling the villains. Most of the villains in *The Avengers* are individuals who are not actually human, but have human-like traits: they have the ability to

communicate through language; they have desires and feelings; and they are usually alienated much like how non-white enemies were portrayed in the 1970s and 80s. For instance, in Issue #135 (1975), Ultron-5, a robot villain, wants an android, or a 'son', to have it fight against the Avengers. Ultron-5 takes the Human Torch's (a member of the Fantastic Four) body in hopes to create a memory-less android. However, since the Human Torch's body needed repair, Ultron-5 forces the original creator of the Human Torch, Horton, to bring him back to life as Vision. Horton completes the task but does not erase the memories of the Human Torch, disobeying the demands of Ultron-5. Vision and Ultron-5 fight. Ultron-5 uses Wonder Man's brain patterns to control Vision, declaring that Vision "shall possess a new personality – a blank slate upon which [he] may write anything [he wishes]." But Vision breaks free from Ultron-5's mastery. Certainly, there are multiple ways of interpreting this text. One such way is: by wanting a son, this non-human individual wants to complete its lifecycle by 'fathering' another to carry out desired duties, as any father would want from his son. Another interpretation: this battle for power very much mirrors the way the current ruling class works to sustain its dominance. Ultron-5's declaration that he would make Vision's personality a blank slate to "write anything" he wishes reflects efforts of the ruling class to impose its ideas through media onto adolescents, for their own ideas about the world are malleable. Another interpretation: Ultron-5 may be a symbol of the working class individual who is an alienated industrialist struggling for power with a clear class consciousness and the desire to defeat the 'elite' group of the Avengers. By portraying Ultron-5 in this light, the working class individual is discouraged from challenging those already in power. Ultimately, Ultron-5 is defeated by Vision, which suggests that the working class individual will never ascend. From this example, perhaps we can say that these power struggles between superheroes and villains represent class struggle in society. With villains losing every

battle against the elite group of superheroes, the comics suggest that the working individual will never be able to surpass the ruling class; the working class effort to do so is futile.

In addition to suggesting indubitable defeat of the working class, *The Avengers* uses ideas of gender and race as buffer zones to create issues outside of class struggle, preventing readers, specifically those of the working class, from attaining class consciousness. In Marxist terms, mass media are tools of the ruling class. Since the ruling class has control over mass media, it disseminates ideas and world views favorable for sustaining its power in society through media. Bonilla-Silva (2004) alludes to the tri-racial system that consists of three racial strata (white, honorary white, collective black). Just as the honorary white serves as a buffer zone between whites and the collective black, gender and race concerns divert the public's attention away from engaging in class struggle by clouding the readers' minds with issues that obscure class consciousness. Additionally, the middle class itself serves as a buffer zone between the rich and the poor. Such is why mass media produce material geared primarily towards white, middle-class individuals. One social phenomenon worth mentioning is that most people in the U.S. identify themselves as middle class, even though the monetary value of their assets and the amount of money they earn do not reflect actual middle-class status. People of the 'upper middle class' and those of the 'lower middle class' certainly have significantly different lives, but they still consider themselves as middle class, which is further proof of media influence on the public. Since media texts have been geared towards the middle class, many people not of the middle class adopt world views that make them fail to see the existence of class struggle. As alluded before, I interpreted the issue involving the communist leader as one that suggests capitalism will always defeat communism because communism is a classless society. Class in the U.S. is, in fact, a rather difficult topic to discuss even amongst peers. Despite the fact that we know class itself

exists, individuals are unaware of class conflict because mass media enforces false consciousness in working class members by ignoring the subject of class entirely and promoting myths of classlessness in society.

Not only does *The Avengers* uses other societal problems to conceal issues of class conflict, it constructs narratives focusing on individual characters to introduce serious themes such as love to avoid dealing with the class division endemic in the capitalist societies which superheroes defend. As noted before, later issues of *The Avengers* are more involved in 'drama' and personal interactions between members within the group rather than matters of public protection from villains. In fact, the later comics in the series seemed to have fewer villains and significantly less action in the narrative. For instance, the identity crisis and love matters that Vision has in Issue #23 (1999) is utterly irrelevant to the mission of the Avengers. However, the comics series began to shift towards the Hollywood narrative, causing the superhero comics to become standardized along with all other forms of mass media, introducing themes that do not contribute to the storyline. Adorno and Horkheimer (1993) argued that all aspects of mass culture are essentially standardized (or identical) to manipulate the public into apathy. People crave 'standardized' media products because they seem to validate their lives that are standardized as well: at work, the working individual is alienated by dull and repetitive tasks, but the alienation is relieved by dull, repetitive products of media. In popular culture, pseudo-individualization is important in masking the standardization of cultural products, making the consumer of these products apathetic, passive, and susceptible to manipulation by the ruling class.

***Conclusion***

Through grounded theory methodology, I analyzed several issues of *The Avengers* to determine how dominant ideologies are perpetuated and the purpose of their perpetuation in all superhero comics. I chose *The Avengers* because it is one of the few comic book series that were of a team of many superhero characters from various comic books. Since this series was first released in the 1960s and issues were published until the 2000s, this long span of time allows for a comparative analysis of how the ideas are conveyed in media through history. What was partially difficult about this project was that not many scholars write about how comic books shape ideologies, particularly class in society

For this reason, I chose to study this particular form of media. As I examined comic books and read the literature regarding how media reflect societal ideas, it became apparent that scholars seldom investigate comics through the lens of class. It was also evident that matters regarding race and gender are used to mask class issues. It is widely known in the social sciences that race, gender, and class are intertwined, but few, if any, comic scholars discuss how race and gender are used to conceal class issues in society. By consistently reminding readers that people should be differentiated by race and gender, it steers readers away from the awareness of how these two demographics are heavily influenced and shaped by bourgeois class processes. Not only do race and gender serve to mask hierarchical class relations and considerations in society, it also serves to sustain a middle class buffer group between the very rich and the very poor to obscure class inequality.

What is so interesting about the dominant group's class ideology is how its ubiquity often goes unrecognized and taken for granted as 'common sense'. With ideas that get recycled from generation to generation, it makes studying comic books like *The Avengers* intriguing, especially

since comic books are so popular. In fact, the idea of how popular comic books are was also baffling to me, and prompted me to investigate why comic books, despite its simplicity in a world that praises complexity, are so appealing to not only youths but also older generations. What became apparent is that it is the simplicity itself that captures the attention of readers, for the simplicity in how characters are drawn makes readers able to relate with these characters that live in a world of awesome fantasy. The superhero genre itself is of awesome fantasy; we 'know' (that is, we *think* we know) that it is physically impossible to defy gravity and shoot laser beams out of our eyes, but the beauty of comic books is the flexibility in imagination, which allows readers whose lives are alienated and dull to not be reminded of this and provides a further means of preventing class consciousness.

As a consequence of the simultaneously appealing elements of both fantasy and realism, readers forget, or made unaware of, their class disposition in society; readers are complacent and manipulated into apathy in order to discourage class uprising. Scholars have remarked that the comic book market must cater to the audience, and though such is true, comic books must recycle these ideas since dominant ideologies are widely accepted in society. Not only do superhero comic books reflect dominant ideas, but also construct the realities of society, making these dominant ideas seem 'natural' and often defined with biological factors (e.g. 'boys are naturally stronger than girls') in addition to giving readers an impression that this superhero fantasy *could* be real, steering them away from being aware of their class disposition.

My findings suggest that it may be fruitful in the future to examine the television series and movies based on *The Avengers* comics books to see how ideas in the comic books transform, or how they perpetuate ideas differ, in moving picture forms of media. Although the movie itself is not a cartoon, it would be worth studying how other people interpret the comic books from

selecting specific actors to portray specific characters to writing the script, and how they carry out the messages in the comic books on screen. This poses as a potential project since my interpretation of the texts certainly differ from that of a rich, white, male individual. Nevertheless, investigating the class dynamics and the absence of class struggle in the superhero comics is rather difficult since the analysis is primarily looking for things that are *not* there and things that are *not* said. Perhaps given more time, all 538 issues may be examined to have a better sense of class dynamics in superhero comics, or of race and gender issues in the absence of class struggle. By looking at particularly superhero comics, we have a better sense of how the appeal of superhero comics *works* with the effort to preserve white male ruling class supremacy. Bringing light to something we take for granted every day (e.g. the simplicity of comic books) can transform the way we look at all other forms of media, and question how our ideas have been formulated and influenced by such things we take for granted. This way, we can allow ourselves much more agency in choosing what ideas to adopt and what ideas to reject; we can be aware of our own class disposition and the existing class struggles in society; we can finally steer *ourselves* away from complacency and be avengers ourselves against the ruling class for manipulating us into apathy.

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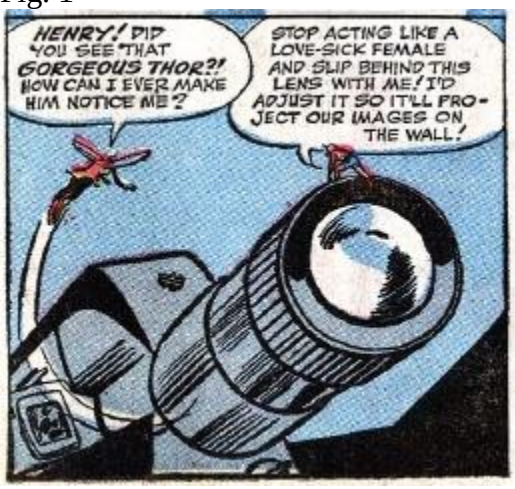
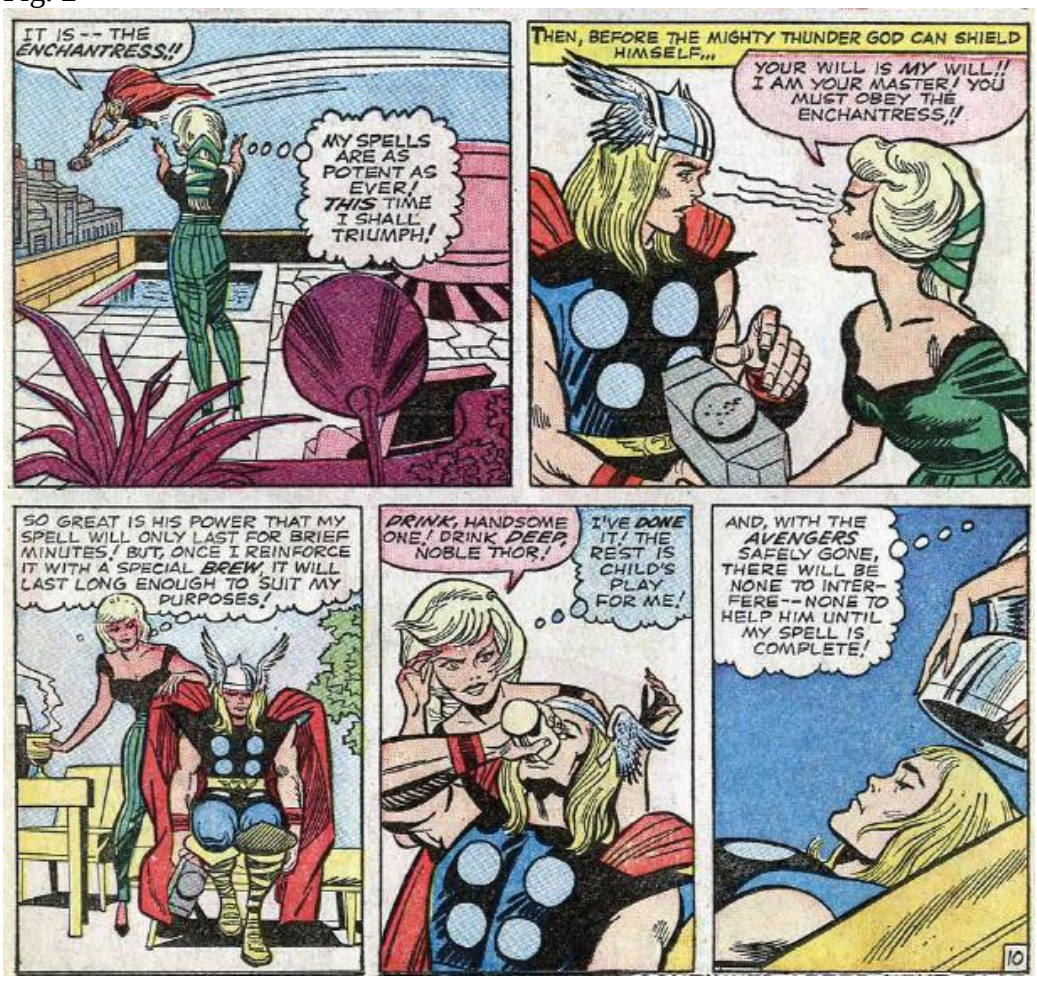
## *Appendix*

Fig. 1




*Issue #1 (1963)*

Fig. 2




*Issue #7 (1964)*

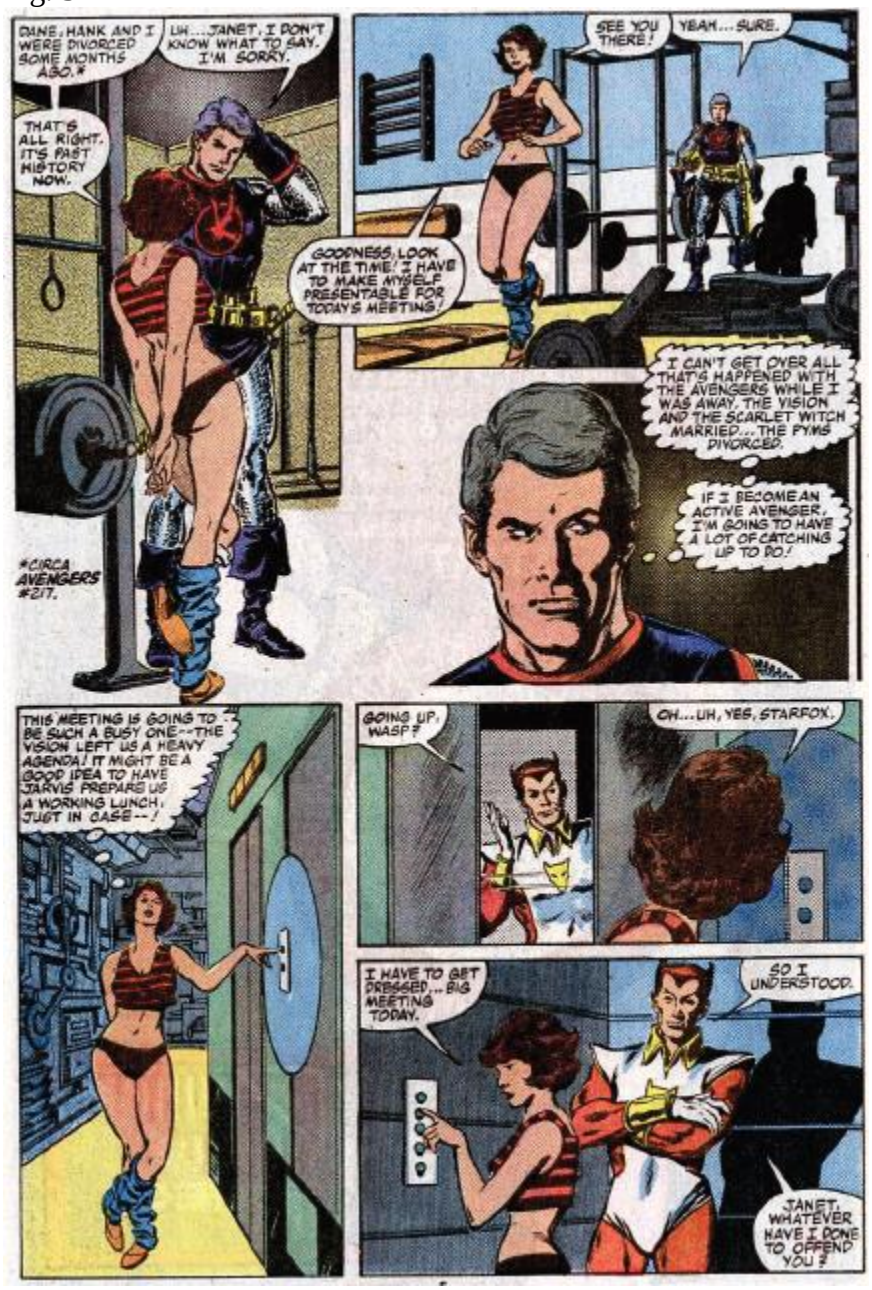
Fig. 3


*Issue #18 (1965)*

Fig. 4


*Issue #195 (1980)*

Fig. 5




*Issue #256 (1985)*

Fig. 6


*Issue #256 (1980)*

Fig. 7


*Issue #23 (1999)*

Fig. 8


*Issue #18 (1965)*