



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts - Papers

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts

2012

Popular representations of leadership: heroes and superheroes in times of crisis

Luis Gomez Romero

McGill University, lgromero@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

L. Gomez Romero (2012). Popular Representations of Leadership: Heroes and Superheroes in Times of Crisis. Lain Entralgo, Schuler, Botella and Grados, July (8-12).

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Popular representations of leadership: heroes and superheroes in times of crisis

Abstract

The importance of popular culture in the study of politics—especially in the creation, development and propagation of political ideas—has scarcely been examined in any depth by students of politics. The cultural representations of political institutions and processes apparently escape the defined fields of the theoretical disciplines concerned with political phenomena. Political philosophy, particularly in the Englishspeaking world, has been largely committed in the last four decades to provide rationally compelling arguments aimed to justify the principles of political morality, detaching itself from concrete political experience and privileging instead an abstract, universal and ahistorical normative account of the ideal polity. Political theory has done no better as it tends to disintegrate itself in political science, becoming increasingly subservient of sociology and quantitative empirical explanations of political events and processes (Horton and Baumeister, 1996: 3-5).

Keywords

representations, leadership, heroes, superheroes, times, crisis, popular

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

L. Gomez Romero (2012). Popular Representations of Leadership: Heroes and Superheroes in Times of Crisis. *Lain Entralgo, Schuler, Botella and Grados*, July (8-12).

POPULAR REPRESENTATIONS OF LEADERSHIP: HEROES AND SUPERHEROES IN TIMES OF CRISIS [SUMMARY]*

LUIS GÓMEZ ROMERO
McGill University
Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas

The importance of popular culture in the study of politics—especially in the creation, development and propagation of political ideas—has scarcely been examined in any depth by students of politics. The cultural representations of political institutions and processes apparently escape the defined fields of the theoretical disciplines concerned with political phenomena. Political philosophy, particularly in the English-speaking world, has been largely committed in the last four decades to provide rationally compelling arguments aimed to justify the principles of political morality, detaching itself from concrete political experience and privileging instead an abstract, universal and ahistorical normative account of the ideal polity. Political theory has done no better as it tends to disintegrate itself in political science, becoming increasingly subservient of sociology and quantitative empirical explanations of political events and processes (Horton and Baumeister, 1996: 3-5).

Recent sociocultural changes in the realities of most of contemporary complex societies underscore the limitations of these methodological approaches. The ‘Arab Spring’ and the ‘Occupy’ movements that have flourished in the last months, for example, have demonstrated that democratic and liberal rhetoric contrasts sharply against a growing perception of inequality in everyday life. Ideological contracts are progressively losing legitimacy. All over the world a wide array of emotions—anger, disenchantment and despair, as well as hopefulness and expectation—have seized a crucial role in contemporary political scenarios. Neither the usual decontextualized and ahistorical perspective of political philosophy nor the customary impersonal and technocratic stance of political theory, seem to be up to the challenge of our present political agendas.

The belief that these modes of theoretical reflection on politics are unsatisfactory has gained several supporters among scholars but has not led yet to a major shift in the current methodological paradigms. Though frequent calls to the construction of interdisciplinary scholarship are heard nowadays almost everywhere in the world of learning, it seems that there is not an authentic determination to overcome the pervasive

* This is a condensed account of an ongoing work. Please address correspondence concerning the final version of this paper to Luis Gómez Romero, e-mail: luis.gomezromero@mcgill.ca.

division of labor that characterized the twentieth century. Interdisciplinary studies should involve the process of answering a question, solving a problem, or addressing a topic that is too broad or complex to be dealt with adequately by a single discipline or profession (Klein and Newell, 1998: 3). The reality, unfortunately, is quite far from the ideal. Interdisciplinary scholarship paradoxically resists combining disciplines in order to really achieve new insights into real-world issues that are broader than any single discipline. On the contrary, interdisciplinary studies have adapted themselves to the relentless tendency towards specialization. Typically, scholars and researchers have narrowed their focus to one specific topic within a closely circumscribed area of enquiry that falls within the epistemological field of two or more disciplines. Of course, there are many exceptions to this claim, but it still works as a generalization.¹ This essay, for example, addresses the representation of leadership in the superhero comic book aesthetics. Each of its intercrossed study subjects has been developed in an independent cognitive field: leadership studies and comic studies.

Though we can hardly deny that academic specialization has significantly contributed to the material progress of the human species, it has also produced harmful effects with respect to the humanities and social sciences. These forms of enquiry have as their subject our own self-understanding, i. e., a kind of knowledge in which the sense of fragmentation resulting from specialization is extremely troubling. While our lives have many facets and we may suit many different roles, we also understand ourselves as possessing some sort of unity that is neglected—and even undermined—by cognitive specialization (Horton and Baumeister, 1996: 1).

This essay intends to overcome the shortcomings of academic overspecialization regarding the theoretical discourses on leaders and their political significance by integrating the so-called ‘narrative turn’ in political theory (MacIntyre, 1985 [2007]; Rorty, 1989; Taylor, 1989) with a cultural studies account of the ‘vernacular theories’ (McLaughlin, 1996) of leadership developed in superhero comic book narratives. Just as the nineteenth century novel has become the site of considerable scholarly contention as to its ideological assumptions and normative implications (Aslami, 2012; Bender, 1987; Miller, 1988; Watt, 1957), so this essay proposes to undertake the same analysis for the connotations, perceptions and attitudes towards leadership represented in contemporary comic book superheroes. This way, rather than referring leadership to a sphere of drama and power play whose far-reaching consequences tend to emphasize the personae of ‘celebrity politicians’ (Marshall, 1997), I propose to root leaders in the everyday life of meaning-making and belonging that engages most individuals either as producers or consumers of popular culture.

Methodologically speaking, syntheses between disciplines often prove problematic. In the first part of this essay I shall address this difficulty by indicating the cognitive utility of narrative in political theory while spanning it over the theoretical production of non-academics as expressed in popular cultural artefacts. In other words, I contend that in our world popular culture is not in any way a mere *representation* of any particular political principles, arguments or theories, but actually a two-faced *source* of

normative politics: on the one hand, a record and memory of traditional practices that have not lost their power to constitute political ideals, and on the other hand a reified reign of commodity aimed to pacify its subjects by replacing performance with consumption and participation with observation. In the second part I will situate comic book superhero narratives as intellectually sophisticated vernacular theories on leadership by defining the main traits of a superhero through a comparison between two character tropes rooted in different stages in this genre's development: Superman and Spider-Man. Finally, I will discuss the mid-to-late 1980s reevaluation of superheroes as resonant political signifiers for a world far more unfair and far more dangerous than that one in which Superman was conceived. Specifically, I will analyze Frank Miller's graphic novel *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta* (1982-1985)—whose witty revolutionary dressed in a Guy Fawkes outfit has become a worldwide symbol of resistance—as vernacular narrative vehicles for challenging received notions of charismatic authority and leadership.

¹ Among many other notable exceptions, see Rancière (2000, 2004) and Žižek (2008 [1989], 2010)

References

- Aslami, Z (2012) *The Dream Life of Citizens: Late Victorian Novels and the Fantasy of the State*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Bender, J (1987) *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Klein, J and Newell W (1998). "Advancing Interdisciplinary Studies." In Newell W (ed.) *Interdisciplinarity: Essays from the Literature*. New York: College Entrance Examination Board: 3-22.
- MacIntyre, A (1985 [2007]) *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. 3rd ed. Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Marshall, P. D. (1997). *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McLaughlin, T (1996). *Street Smarts and Critical Theory: Listening to the Vernacular*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Miller, D. A. (1988) *The Novel and the Police*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Horton J and Baumeister A (eds.) (1996) *Literature and the Political Imagination*. Routledge: New York.
- (1996a) "Literature, Philosophy and Political Theory." In: Horton J and Baumeister A (eds.): 1-31.
- Rancière, J (2000) *Le Partage du Sensible: Esthétique et Politique*. Paris: La fabrique.
- (2004) *Malaise dans l'Esthétique*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Rorty, R (1989) *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Ch (1989) *Sources of the Self: the Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Watt, I (1957) *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

Žižek, S (2008 [1989]) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso.
----- (2010) *Living in the End of Times*. London: Verso.