

There Is Nothing New Under the Sun

—The Fact of Superhero Politics

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Although a lot of scholars attempted to arouse some new passion toward further political research on “superhero” for which they combed through the history of the “superhero” development, whether “superhero” is truly worth such efforts remains a question to be reviewed. Can the phenomena of “superhero” really stand by itself as a social element when its characteristics of the times have been stripped off? Does “superhero” today have any essential differences with “god” of the past? Do the “superhero” phenomena belong only to the U.S. political culture? Can one unique political rule or theory be directed from it? Varied answers to the questions may have led scholars to greatly different conclusions.

Keywords: superhero, god, American politics

Two political scientists from prestigious schools in U.S., Matthew J. Costello and Kent Worcester, published a brief symposium titled “The Politics of the Superhero” in the beginning of 2014. This symposium, published on the top-class professional publication “Political Science & Politics”, discussed how the “superhero” phenomena rising within the American pop culture can be interpreted from a political perspective, what study and achievement on “superhero” has been done and found in the political science field, and what conceptions, ideologies, and changes of social political culture the prevalence of “superhero” has been revealing.

What Is “Superhero”?

“Super” with certain kind of “humanity” existed in all phrases of human civilization (Packer, 2009). They existed as “god” in the past and as “superhero” today. However different these “super” may be, they share the same appearance of human or being born out of human. These “super” get involved into the mortal life with no exception and served the human society with their special abilities (Hick, 2009), in the way of promoting justice or saving the world from destruction, etc. The “super” in the modern days have basically limited their actions to the offset of the defect in human society, instead of controlling over the course of development of the civilization or assigning proxy (like that in the past). They is living among the mortals and giving up being superior with dominant power or revelators. That has shifted both the self-positioning and social positioning of the “super” from “god” to “hero” (Dipaolo, 2011).

To clearly define the group of “superhero” requires a clarifying of their essential differences with ordinary human beings, which can include two questions, “what is the duty of superhero” and “what factors qualify superhero”. Regarding the first question, it may be hard either to approbate or deny that “doing good deeds” is

the duty of superhero. Would helping the old across the street be among the duties of superheroes? It is obviously a matter far too easy for superheroes and as everybody is doing the job, there is no real need for asking the attendance of the superheroes. Then what can be their duty? In the superhero stories, for instance, the main mission of Green Arrow was to punish the evil that are unpunished by law; the most conspicuous heroic deed conducted by Iron Man was to cease the war; and the most conspicuous deed of Spider-man and Superman was to help the victims in traffic accidents. From above it seems that no matter large or small deeds they were performing, superheroes often serve a sharing function of solving the existing problems that are not solvable by the society itself. Or in other words, the mission is to offset the defect of the human society of the time.

As for the second question, it is found that having super-natural power (or not) alone may not be sufficient to qualify “superhero”. Superheroes, such as Black Willow, Green Arrow, and Red Arrow etc., are all among this category and have nothing magical or mysterious. Besides that, no one should use owning power above that of an average man as a decisive standard of qualifying “superhero”, since, for example, superhero Kick-Ass, as well as most of his allies in the story, is no more powerful than a normal person. Therefore it should be cleared that a standard based merely on power of ability can hardly define “superhero” (Gesh & Weinberg, 2002). If so, then what after all makes the “superhero”? The key is believed to be courage, whether the certain individuals “dare to” do what the society believes that the superhero would do (which is to make up for the deficiency of the society). To take the same instance, Kick-Ass is considered as a real superhero, in spite of his figure and strength being both like ordinary people. He held no outstanding abilities to gracefully or easily perform the job of offset the defects. Nor was he able to save human race at doom. He qualifies superhero because he “dared to” (Johnston, 2008). Hereby it can be concluded that “superhero” can be better defined as the general designation of individuals who dare to fix the defect of the society.

Across Time Comparison of “Super”

The key to understand the superhero culture in the modern civilization is to prescribe the disparity of “superhero” today and “god” in the past. The questions such as what the main differences between superheroes within modern pop culture and ancient gods as religious belief or incipient ideologies are, or whether there are differences between the pop culture itself and the religious belief would both be discussed in this part.

At the beginning, the comparison of the born backgrounds of “superhero” and “god” and the paths of their development are going to be studied. Firstly, as it is found that the modern cultures that created superheroes are often those that already have had their own religious belief and corresponding idol(s), the reference religious belief in this paper, Christianity, is thus also chosen based on the same criteria (emerging in the background with other pre-existing religions) (Cross & Livingstone, 2005). At the birth of Christianity, Judaism as well as Nordic and Greek mythology system was somewhat complete, but the interpretation power of religion had long been controlled in the hand of upper-class, which made citizens in lower-class longing for their own idols (Cross & Livingstone, 2005). In a similar way, when the conception of “superhero” was created, citizens in the U.S. were also looking for new idols that they can reach and consume, because the prevalent religion from the Europe, the protestant, and the Catholic Church, had gotten far from the life of new immigrates and the lower-class. As for the path of developing, Christianity spread from the underlying masses to the whole Roman Empire while Marvel has concluded in a straight forward way that their development was “from pulp to pop” (Marval, 2014).

Secondly, it should be pointed out that the major disparity of “superhero” and “god” lies not in their ability of “genesis” (or not) but in their function to the society. The two main tasks of ancient gods were to justify the rights to rule and to revealate the ruling (McClelland, 1996); the duty of modern superhero, however, is to make up for the deficiency of the society. At first glance these two seem to be incompatible, but in fact they share the very same core, because the two most urgent need of the primitive society were to solve the problem of the right to rule and the way to rule (McClelland, 1996). On the other hand, modern society does not need to face that again since the political system today often has provided the answer within the human society itself (Heywood, 2002), which enables superheroes to focus on other issues. In all, gods and superheroes do have similar abilities and original functions while their social statuses are different, but this is obviously not under their control.

In addition, the social status of ancient religions and modern pop culture, like that of ancient gods and modern superhero, has little common ground, but their functions are alike, to reflect the spiritual needs of human and to satisfy these needs, and they both are subjective to the development level of the human society (Ma, 1990). This can be learned through the evolution of religious myth and superhero story. For example in the oldest myth, Gilgamesh was originally only a king stronger than mankind; his godhead of Gilgamesh was added and magnified as the myth passed on (Qiu, 2000). Capital America made by company Marvel was, too, a warrior stronger than normal people in the beginning, while as it develops, his spiritual power gradually came to be emphasized, especially with the moving “Thor’s hammer” as a symbol (Brevoort & Alonso, 2011). At the same time, it is clear that the abilities of gods of the old times never escaped the visible “natural power” (C. G. Wang & L. P. Wang, 2011) while the equipment and abilities of modern superheroes today also demonstrate the modern science and technology progress.

Finally, regarding their contents, sharp dichotomy of good and evil as well as wars between gods were seen everywhere in old time myth all over the world (Wang, 2013). So do the superhero stories have the opposite of “super-evil”? Superhero stories are believed to not only have fully carried and expanded the dichotomy of good and evil, but even imitated an O.A.A. which is similar to Almighty (Bendis & Dell’Otto, 2011). While having a similar system of deity like that in myth, superheroes can also have conflicts among themselves, most seen in the Civil War series produced by Marvel. It would be hard to deny that the superhero alliances and super-evil alliances in any animation company are not attempts to copy those that have appeared in real human war history. From the past till today, the idolatry seldom has breakthrough; perhaps the one progress is to have shifted the idols from people’s spiritual attribution to their spiritual consumption.

Why Was “Superhero” Born in U.S.?

Through reviewing history, it can be found that the birth and spread of new idols is often associated with ethnic integration. The emergence and preaching of Christianity with the expansion of Roman Empire was a typical example (Cross & Livingstone, 2005). As the new idols of modern time, “superhero” was born in a similar way after WWII in America when the immigrates from worldwide started to came to a consensus on what is “the Americans” (Grieco & Cassidy, 2015). The U.S., being a nation of immigrants, needed a figure to share with its people the new-born spirit of “America” and that is what gave the rise of Captain America. There was even a scene of breaking into the Nazi’s and beating up Hitler in the movie, which shows how apparently “superhero” can answer to the social development and needs of its people. Ever since then, the development of superhero never forgets to address the most concerned problems in the society (Brevoort & Alonso, 2011).

Except for the emergence of “superhero”, its positioning in the society and organizational form also comes in line with the characteristics of the American society. Modern “superhero”, like those religious myths in the old times, has established their own world view and system. Regarding this point, it can be seen that “Super” in America being received as heroes instead of gods is fully affected by the modern politics of democracy and the spread of the conception of equity. This is because in such a society greatly emphasizing individual value today, people can hardly recognize new, universal, and lofty idols (Wood, 1972). And at the same time, with the development of science and technology, neither do people need prophets to lead their secular society any more (Galligan, 2006). What’s more, every story about “superhero” has illustrated how the modern democracy emphasizes its people. In Civil War series, it was people that stopped the conflicts between the superheroes, and in the story of Spider-man it was people again that protected him from the evil. All these are responding to the idea of “of the people, by the people and for the people’ of America (Wang, 2007).

Therefore, the modern “superhero” was born in America rather than anywhere else is necessary due to the unique attributes of the U.S. society. Most features of superhero, the worldview in the stories, and the organizational form (especially the positioning of superheroes being heroes rather than gods and its function of offset the defect of the society), all reflect the society of America. Given the objective environment today, it should be lucid that only America has the earth for the birth of superhero.

Superheroes’ Future (Politics of Superhero)

From what is discussed above, it can be deducted that superheroes and old religious idols have few radical differences. They both are the product of the need of human society. However, as the positioning of gods and superheroes varies, their political functions distinguish each other. Ancient gods had the major tasks of justifying the right to rule while superheroes certainly do not. The political essence of superhero is the charisma; they exist as the concrete or the symbol of political spirit. Besides charisma, “superhero” stories are also designed the imagination of the near future when human abilities are expanded, which is identical to the Utopian society in the old religious stories. In this sense, although superhero is imaginary, it is important as a political hypothetical test.

Conclusion

Despite that modern superheroes are born in very different time and have very different story content compared to religious myth, their origins are both response to the need of human society and the development of human society. The political hypothetical test of “superhero” should still provide critical reference and think to the development modern society, though the function and positioning of “superhero” has changed from the empowerment the ruler and enlightenment of politics to the offset the defect of the society and representation of national spirit. By all that stated above, it should be sufficient to conclude and reclaim our position in this paper that in its essence, “there is nothing new under the sun”.

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