

Economic Inequality in Comic Book Stories

Micah Gomez

Economic inequality and forms of class privilege are interesting topics to study given their unique place in political discourse, and their appeal to bipartisan politics. How they are represented and addressed in fictional comic books is complicated because while relatable, it can be difficult to portray in such a limited medium. Making real-world connections is going to be valuable to determine just how the portrayal in fantastical media translates over and what methods are used to portray these issues. Especially in superhero stories, this paper seeks to examine how these topics are addressed and how they impact a hero's ability to perform their duties and operate in their stories, as well as what messages about class analysis can be pulled from these stories.

One example of class privilege is the Amazing Spider-Man graphic novel, *Death of the Stacy's*. In the first plotline in the collection, Captain George Stacy dies during a fight between Spider-Man and Doctor Octopus. Spider-Man uses a chemical to make Doctor Octopus lose control of his mechanical arms, and they knock a chimney off the top of the building landing on Captain Stacy who jumped under it to push a child out of the way. Because of the trauma at the moment over losing yet another father figure, Spider-Man picks up the body of Captain Stacy and brings him to the top of a building, trying to quickly get him to medical treatment, but stops when Stacy asks to be put down to talk to him, where he reveals that he knew Spider-Man's identity, and dies. The people on the street start making accusations that Spider-Man killed him intentionally and is trying to hide the body¹.

¹ See *Death of the Stacy's* pages 63-65

The consequences of this event start slowly, starting with the rumor about Spider-Man killing Captain Stacy becoming so popular that even Gwen loses trust in him- though, not knowing his secret identity as her boyfriend, Peter. She turns to Sam Bullit, her father's political rival for the position of police captain, for help in holding Spider-Man responsible for the death of her father. This leads to a lot more success in Bullit's campaign, and heavily villainizes Spider-Man as more convoluted events lead to him taking suspicious action to protect his identity that makes him appear to be acting with malice².

Peter had no significant way to counter these accusations and the smear campaign against him, having no money, he did not have a way to run a campaign of his own or counter the accusations. This has a direct impact on Peter's ability to perform as Spider-Man when Iceman starts interfering with Spider-Man's investigation of Bullit, suspecting Spidey has malicious intentions. However, being a member and participant of the working class, he does have more personal ties to many characters he comes in contact with. For example, when it is revealed that Robbie Robertson, editor at the Daily Bugle, has been building a portfolio on Bullit, and turns the Bugle against him with Peter's help, Bullit kidnaps Robbie and plans to have him killed. Lucky for Spider-Man, due to being in his alter-ego at the Daily Bugle, he catches wind of this and can get a jump on the assassination to save Robertson. The two of them, plus Iceman, meet Bullit at a fund-raiser and expose his crimes, putting an end to his campaign, both for police chief and against Spider-Man³.

The real-world connections here seemed almost deliberate, even though this was published well before any of the connections made. While of course there was an existing political environment it meant to critique, it seemed to like a very vivid example of art imitating

² See *Death of the Stacy's* pages 69-75

³ See *Death of the Stacy's* pages 100-105

life. Bullit resembled how Donald Trump handled his political power and how he campaigned. When meeting with Gwen, Sam Bullit lectures her about the war that society is in, resembling the real-world right-wing concept of a culture war. The phrasing he uses is nearly identical, seen from Bullit's conversation to Gwen, "We're at war with the left-wing anarchists who are trying to destroy this great, proud nation of ours!"⁴ and Donald Trump's tweet, "the problem is the arsonists, looters, criminals, and anarchists, waiting to destroy [our city] (and our country)!"⁵ Among this parallel, there were others, such as Robbie calling Sam Bullit a fascist⁶, which by many metrics, such as Umberto Eco's *Ur-Fascism*⁷, Donald Trump might be categorized as too. The two also both run on a platform of "law and order", with a disdain for liberalism⁸, and Bullit plans to "make our city's streets safe again"¹⁰. Where this connection ties itself off is when they villainize political threats by trying to, without justification, label them as often perceived political evils. In the examples, Bullit's henchmen are beating up Peter when he refuses to give up information on Spider-Man and calling him a "rotten commie radical"¹¹. And of course, there is a comparably unfounded quote from Donald Trump, "A vote for Biden is a vote to give control of government over to the globalists, and communists, and socialists, and wealthy, liberal hypocrites"¹².

Donald Trump is an interesting case study in class analysis because he ran on a very working-class and populist political campaign. Populism on the left is often described as

⁴ From *Death of the Stacys*, page 72

⁵ See Donald Trump's tweet from June 4, 2020

⁶ From *Death of the Stacys*, page 73

⁷ As referenced in-text, Umberto Eco's *Ur-Fascism*

⁸ From *Death of the Stacys*, page 72

⁹ See Donald Trump's Facebook post from June 4, 2020

¹⁰ From *Death of the Stacys*, page 75

¹¹ From *Death of the Stacys*, page 79

¹² See Donald Trump's tweet from November 2, 2020

socialist¹³, or at the very least as worker's rights movements, but on the right, it uses similar tactics as a façade to promote right-wing cultural goals, such as nationalism and privatization. Both Sam Bullit and Donald Trump can be used to display the adoption of rhetoric to garner support, especially from the economically disadvantaged masses, and how they subvert it to promote authoritarian and upper-class interests.

Fear is most often the method that right-wing populism uses injects itself into political discourse. In *Death of the Stacys*, this is seen with Sam Bullit's promises to keep the city safe from superheroes, anarchists, and "all others that would destroy our way of life"¹⁴. This is often essentially an advertisement for increasing police budgets and authorizing more state force in how they handle crime, and this was visible in the summer of 2020 following the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent protests and riots. The discourse around these events was very revealing about where priorities laid in the political response, where business property was often prioritized as the focus of most discussions¹⁵. This is reliably the case in every historical civil rights movement, to delegitimize the demands for justice made by the protest participants¹⁶. Consistently, those who claim to advocate for the "working man" or "suburban America" don't truly have the working class' interests in mind. Their policy is based on Reaganomics and seeks to protect property rights of corporate interests above anything else¹⁷.

Another easy example to draw is the analysis of deliberately designed upper-class heroes and their working-class counterparts. Referring back to Spider-Man, this time the iteration from Mark Webb and Sam Raimi's Spider-Man series, as well as the Insomniac iteration, there is a

¹³ See *Introduction: Contemporary Counter-Movements in the Age of Brexit and Trump* from Silke Roth

¹⁴ From *Death of the Stacys*, page 104

¹⁵ From *How To Cover These Police Riots – SOME MORE NEWS*, at 10:49

¹⁶ See Charles Brooks' 1967 comic from the Birmingham News

¹⁷ From *How To Cover These Police Riots – SOME MORE NEWS*, at 33:25

stark contrast between the stories told and Jon Favreau's Iron Man series, primarily in the resources available to each character while in similar universes.

One of the defining elements of Tobey Maguire's Spider-Man is his relatable, personal struggles. Making rent, maintaining relationships, vigilant crime-fighting, and keeping up with schoolwork are all struggles that the average person has to deal with. Spider-Man 2 is often praised because of its focus on this part of Peter's story. It follows Peter as he tries to figure out how to navigate his relationship with Mary Jane Watson, which he tries to juggle with his pizza delivery and photography jobs, as well as his classes at Columbia University¹⁸. The insomniac Spider-Man from the PlayStation games also had these issues, which play major plot points, and goes to show just how integral these aspects are to the character if they made their way into even video game adaptation. There is an interesting focus on the housing crisis, and while it's focused on New York, it's an issue that exists everywhere, and one Peter is shown as able to help alleviate, but helpless to solve, even as a superhero¹⁹. The characters seen in the homeless shelter are portrayed as exactly what their real-life counterparts are- victims of an economic system that rewards existing wealth and leaves near no room for recovery from the depths of economic despair. Many side characters are given their own complex details, side stories, and even appearances in the sequel following Miles Morales²⁰. This was an incredibly healthy depiction of people in similar situations and while unrelated to the current point, it is important to point out when talking about class analysis and economic struggles.

The Amazing Spider-Man starring Andrew Garfield went a different direction, with Peter being in high school for most of the series and living with Aunt May for all of it. What's

¹⁸ Seen in Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man 2*

¹⁹ From Insomniac's *Marvel's Spider-Man*, following the FEAST subplot

²⁰ From Insomniac's *Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales*, following the side character Gloria Davila

significant about this version of the character is that he retained more of the inventive and scientific abilities that Tobey's Spider-Man never had the opportunity to demonstrate. Soon after developing his spider powers and an aptitude for parkour in his crime-fighting technique, Peter creates his web-shooters out of engineering equipment he had lying around, materials available for purchase, and his inventive skills. His inventive strategy relied on other engineers who have contributed work to the technology used, the movie does not shy away from that, and to solve the challenges he faces as a hero, Peter almost always relies on being resourceful and adaptive²¹.

Characters like Tony Stark on the other hand are possibly the clearest example of economic privilege that comic books have to offer. Not only is he incredibly wealthy, but what's insinuated in the film adaptation is that he alone is responsible for the good majority of the Iron Man technology. This was somewhat retconned later in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, showing some of the scientists whose work had been stolen or improperly credited while working for Stark, but the pedestal he was placed on was never really touched while the character was still around. Scarcity of resources has never been a problem for him, and neither has any threat to his financial stability. In the third movie, when his house is destroyed, along with every Iron Man suit he had built up to that point, the movie ends with him smiling, standing on the rubble, then turning around to get in his Audi. What would to anyone else be a terrible financial disaster, is completely forgotten after it happens, because these problems cannot be part of a standard Iron Man story²².

This characteristic isn't ignorant of financial consequences, nor is it indicative of a broken character- Iron Man, like every character, is deliberately designed this way. People are complex, but it's difficult to catch the details of everybody's story, especially in such a limited

²¹ Seen in Marc Webb's *The Amazing Spider-Man*

²² Seen in Shane Black's *Iron Man 3*

medium. Comic book characters need to be made very finely to fit the stories the writers want to tell. While Spider-Man exhibits relatable struggles, Iron Man has to deal with problems most can only fantasize about. Especially in the movies, he's freed of worldly problems. Romance isn't an issue, Pepper Potts has the hots for him, there's little drama there. He's not restrained by engineering ability, he's so smart that he can create any tech he needs²³. And as mentioned before, money is never a worry for him. The Marvel Cinematic Universe had to do an entire alien invasion to give him a human struggle, that being his PTSD from the battle in New York²⁴. The economic framework these characters are placed in significantly shapes the problems they face and how they do it.

Drastically shifting the focus, in *V for Vendetta* there is much less direct class struggle, and even the protagonist doesn't seem particularly inhibited by it despite being possibly one of the most politically motivated graphic novels, being a depiction of what one might picture a fascist regime to look like in the age of technology and surveillance. Toward the beginning of the book, the history of how the dystopian setting of the book is created is explained. In the late 20th century, during a war between the Americans and Soviets, the world falls into a climate apocalypse following the use of nuclear weapons. Following the war is the rise of the Norsefire regime, a fascist party that promises to restore the country to order and prosperity. A key detail here is in how the novel describes the party's rise to power. In Evey's recollection of the reconstruction effort, she talks about the coalition government formed by the right-wing political actors and those who happen to share their political interests²⁵. Whether by design or convenience, reactionary politics have a strong disdain for the working class and a strong

²³ Seen in Jon Favreau's *Iron Man*

²⁴ Seen in Shane Black's *Iron Man 3*

²⁵ From *V for Vendetta*, page 28

antisocialist political bend. This makes obtaining a vehicle for their politics very easy- simply align themselves with the interests of corporations, and you have both money and power right out the gate.

A real-world example of this phenomenon can be seen in the conservative think tank Prager University, a reactionary organization that, among other things, actively opposes gender equity²⁶ and the slave abolition movement of the 1800s²⁷, promotes nationalism and white supremacy²⁸, and engages in history revisionism²⁹. What should by all rational accounts be a wildly unpopular propaganda machine has one trick they rely heavily upon, their corporate sponsors. By aligning themselves against labor movements³⁰, PragerU has secured itself a regular check from the likes of the Wilks brothers³¹, a duo of billionaire brothers who profit off of anti-environmentalism through their fracking business³². The self-named university collects all of its funding from either economically conservative organizations³³ or organizations funded by such sources³⁴- that is, if you disregard the \$704k it received in government handouts³⁵ in 2020 as a result of the pandemic it worsened by delegitimizing the threat of³⁶. It's worth pointing out that Prager University has spoken out against government in other contexts, notably when they are not the recipients³⁷.

²⁶ Seen in *The Myth of the Gender Wage Gap* from Prager University

²⁷ See Peter Montgomery's article from Right Wing Watch

²⁸ See Shuan's *How PragerU Lies to You: Charlottesville*, starting at 14:18

²⁹ Seen in *Was the Civil War About Slavery?* from Prager University

³⁰ Seen in *Socialism Makes People Selfish* from Prager University

³¹ From Nellie Bowles' *Right-Wing Views for Generation Z, Five Minutes at a Time*

³² From Peter Montgomery's article in *The American Prospect*

³³ From Evan Halper's article in *The Los Angeles Times*

³⁴ From Mark Oppenheimer's article in *Mother Jones*

³⁵ See the documentation of PragerU's PPP loan from ProPublica

³⁶ See Flora Teoh's article in *Health Feedback*

³⁷ Seen in *The Government Isn't Supposed to Fix Your Life* from Prager University

This takes us back to the background of the fascist dystopia in the graphic novel. Following the nuclear war and its severe consequences, it's implied there was very little ability to contain power, even by governments, and that's where ultrapowerful corporations can flaunt their unique ability of not only self-preservation, but prosperity in the suffering of the working class as well. By combining efforts with these surviving corporations, they can quickly acquire power that cannot be claimed by their political adversaries and use it to push for policy that can do serious harm to marginalized communities. V for Vendetta was able to effectively showcase the importance of intersectional politics in labor movements by aligning these politics together. When the supremacy of fascism and the reduction of human labor as a form of company resources are paired together, socialists and labor activists get grouped with racial, gender, sexual, and other minority groups as a perceived "degeneracy".

Economic inequality and class analysis can be difficult to portray in a lot of media because economically left politics have little traction in the US following the Reagan administration and the red scare. What comic books and graphic novels like the ones referenced do is more subtle. The worlds they create mimic reality in that they are based on feasible economics that abides by the status quo, and the disasters and problems that arise in the stories are, either intentionally or not, a result of an economic system with deep-rooted issues.

Works Cited

- Bowles, Nellie. *Right-Wing Views for Generation Z, Five Minutes at a Time* - *The New York Times*. 4 January 2020. Article. 11 April 2021.
- Brooks, Charles. *I Plan To Lead Another Non-Violent March Tomorrow*. Birmingham News, Birmingham. Comic.
- Eco, Umberto. *Ur-Fascism*. 22 June 1995. Document.
- Halper, Evan. *How a Los Angeles-based conservative became one of the internet's biggest sensations* - *Los Angeles Times*. 23 August 2019. Article. 11 April 2021.
- Insomniac Games. *Marvel's Spider-Man*. 7 September 2018. Video Game.
- . *Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales*. 12 November 2020. Video Game.
- Iron Man 3*. Dir. Shane Black. Perf. Robert Downey Jr. 2006. Digital.
- Iron Man*. Dir. Jon Favreau. Perf. Robert Downey Jr. 2008. Digital.
- Lee, Stan. *Spider-Man: Death of the Stacy's*. New York: Marvel Worldwide, 2014. Graphic Novel.
- Montgomery, Peter. *Meet the Billionaire Brothers You Never Heard of Who Fund the Religious Right* - *The American Prospect*. 13 June 2014. Article. 11 April 2021.
- . *PragerU's Awful Defense of Statues Honoring Robert E. Lee* | *Right Wing Watch*. 21 December 2020. Article. 11 April 2021.
- News, Some More. *How To Cover These Police Riots* - *SOME MORE NEWS*. 6 June 2020. Video.
- Oppenheimer, Mark. *Inside the Right-Wing YouTube Empire That's Quietly Turning Millennials Into Conservatives* - *Mother Jones*. April 2018. Article. 11 April 2021.
- Prager University. *Socialism Makes People Selfish*. 18 July 2016. Video.

—. *The Government Isn't Supposed to Fix Your Life*. 29 February 2016. Video.

—. *The Myth of the Gender Wage Gap*. 22 September 2014. Video.

Prager Univesity. *Was the Civil War About Slavery?* 9 August 2015. Video.

ProPublica. *Prager University Foundation - Tracking PPP*. 11 April 2020. Document.

Roth, Silke. "Introduction: Contemporary Counter-Movements in the Age of Brexit and Trump."
Sociological Research Online (2018). Article.

Shaun. *How PragerU Lies to You: Charlottesville*. 7 August 2019. Video.

Spider-Man 2. Dir. Sam Raimi. Perf. Tobey Maguire. 2004. Digital.

Teoh, Flora. *PragerU video contains misleading claims about COVID-19 deaths, falsely claims
94% of COVID-19 deaths had pre-existing conditions - Health Feedback*. 24 December
2020. Article. 11 April 2021.

The Amazing Spider-Man. Dir. Marc Webb. Perf. Andrew Garfield. 2012. Digital.

Trump, Donald. 4 June 2020. Tweet.

—. 5 August 2020. Facebook.

—. 2 November 2020. Tweet.