

8-25-2013

No Dads: Review of Dan Hassler-Forest's *Capitalist Superheroes*

Gerry Canavan

Marquette University, gerard.canavan@marquette.edu

Gerry Canavan on Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age

No Dads: Cuckolds, Dead Fathers, and Capitalist Superheroes

April 25th, 2013

IN HIS SEMINAL “The Myth of Superman” (still one of the finest essays on superheroes ever written), Umberto Eco identifies anti-narrative as the key to the superhero’s long-term appeal. Superman is at once a timeless mythic archetype and a perfect, endlessly renewable consumer good. The mere existence of such a marvel would necessarily alter every aspect of our society, from our social institutions to our conception of physical law — and yet, in the logic of the comics, neither he nor the world he inhabits is ever allowed to change in any significant way. The world of Superman is always just our own mundane world, give or take a few giant robots here and there. Superman’s Metropolis is in this way revealed to be a myth about the end of history; not even the impossible existence of superpowered aliens can shift the basic social coordinates of liberal democracy or consumer capitalism. Nothing could be different than it already is. There is no alternative; the world we have, as we have it, is the only one that could possibly be.

Eco thus finds a deeply conservative, even reactionary impulse at the heart of the Superman myth, which is replicated at every level of his adventures (and indeed across the superhero adventures of Batman, Spider-Man, Captain America, and all the rest). Superman as a character remains or less exactly as he has been since his original introduction in the late 1930s: the same powers, the same job, the same relationships, the same enemies, even the same age. His adventures offer only the barest illusion of plot; events only happen to Superman insofar as they can be undone later, restoring the original status quo. This lack of narrative extends, paradoxically but crucially, even to the level of sex: Superman, despite his superficial status as an idealized figure of masculinity, is in fact essentially sexless. He can never be allowed to progress to anything like an adult relationship with his ideal match, Lois Lane, nor indeed with any other woman, relying instead on juvenile pranks and “secret identities” to arrest his interaction with women. Nor can he be allowed to father a successor as this too would be, in Eco’s terms, “another step towards his death, as it would lay down another irrevocable premise.” When Superman has been allowed to marry Lois Lane (as he did in the 1990s comics) or father a child with her (as he did off-screen in the 2006 film *Superman Returns*), these events are inevitably reversed by franchise reboots and universe-destroying cosmic resets. Superman must always remain ultimately chaste, his “parsifalism” (as Eco calls it) protecting his story from ever advancing and thereby exhausting itself.

Indeed, from a structural perspective (as Richard Reynolds among others has noted) superheroes like Superman function as the antagonist, not the hero, of their stories. Supervillains like Lex Luthor and the Joker are the true protagonists of these tales, in the sense that they are the ones who seek to act in the world in order to achieve goals; superheroes in contrast exist not to do things but to stop things from happening. (This is of course why so much of the excitement around superhero movies revolves around the villains; the villains, not the heroes, give these

stories their energy and are the source of their pleasures.) As Eco notes, even in the original 1930s comics, we find Superman quickly shifting from a leftist “champion of the oppressed” to someone who seems to spend the bulk of his time protecting military installations and stopping bank robberies. Superman has to fight to preserve the status quo in order to sustain the continuation of his own narrative; when superheroes fail to do so — when they, as in *Watchmen*, seek to actually change the world rather than simply protect it — their stories become narratives with climaxes and logical endpoints and thus exhaust themselves. Superman can perpetuate his endless, decades-long run only so long as he completely defies narrative closure — that is, so long as nothing either good or bad is ever allowed to happen.

As Dan Hassler-Forest shows in his *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age*, part of Zero Books' engaging series of pop-culture analyses that has included Adam Kotsko's *Why We Love Sociopaths*, Carl Freedman's *The Age of Nixon*, and Evan Calder Williams's *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse*, this style of anti-narrative remains alive and well in contemporary cinematic treatments of the superhero myth. Indeed, if anything, Hassler-Forest shows that superhero fantasy has become even more reactionary today, fitting even more seamlessly into the ideologies that constitute both neoliberalism and the renewed national security state. Our superheroes, Hassler-Forest argues, exemplify the logic of power that justifies both capitalist and imperialist violence; quoting Hardt and Negri on *Empire*, Hassler-Forest finds the superhero operating “not on the basis of force itself but on the basis of the capacity to present force as being in the service of right and peace.” Superman presents himself as a simultaneously the avatar of universal principles (“truth, justice”) and the physical embodiment of a specific national might (“the American way”). The buried premise here is that American might stands in the service of truth and justice, or is even remotely compatible with it. The predictable right-wing outrage from several years ago at the news that Superman had renounced his American citizenship thus missed the point entirely: Superman renounced his American citizenship not to reject America but to extra-legally pursue its agenda even more vigorously overseas. Superman, like some idealized fantasy of American air superiority, wants only what is good — and if he must rain down death and terror from the skies in order to preserve that good, well, alas, he must.

Hassler-Forest uses a number of recent superhero films to substantiate his claim that contemporary superhero fantasy embodies the assumptions and internal contradictions of twenty-first-century capitalism and statecraft. Each of the films offers an opportunity for him to explore a different aspect of this ideological nexus. In discussing *Superman Returns*, for instance, he extends Eco's discussion of the anti-narrative timelessness of superheroes by noting these franchises' almost neurotic obsession with replaying their own origins. *Superman Returns* is a spiritual sequel to the 1980s Superman films; Christopher Nolan's Batman series reboots the 1990s *Batman*; *The Amazing Spider-Man* reboots the only-years-old Sam Raimi franchise. (Alternative tagline, as provided by the Internet: “This ain't your slightly older brother's Spider-Man.”)

If anything, this trend seems only to be accelerating: even newer reboots of Superman and Batman are already in the works. For Hassler-Forest, this obsession with origins reflects a flawed nostalgia for an imagined past of lost American greatness; we want quite literally to turn back the clock and relieve those old times again rather than face the new world in which we actually live.

Thus Superman “returns” in 2006’s *Superman Returns*, having been missing in space for five years (i.e., since 9/11/2001); his first public act is to prevent a psychic reply of 9/11 by stopping a jumbo jet crashing into a stadium. (Later in the film, Superman’s uncontrolled fall from a high cliff likewise parallels the “floaters” of the World Trade Center, those who leapt from the highest floors of the building when it became apparent they would not be rescued in time; but Superman of course survives his fall and lives to fly again.) Superman’s “messianic return,” Hassler-Forest writes, ultimately seeks to “relieve the country from the burden of the past by transforming the trauma of 9/11 into a narrative of heroic salvation and redemption” — whose ultimate psychic reward is a return to the time before the attacks and allowing them to be prevented through the judicious use of preemptive violence.

Christopher Nolan’s critically acclaimed Batman films loom very large in the book precisely because they engage this fantasy narrative so directly. By taking up Batman’s call to extra-legal violence and permanent surveillance, we can prevent future attacks no matter how dedicated our opposition — thus a character who originally sought to transform Gotham becomes one who only seeks to preserve it. Both *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* depict “a conservative hero successfully averting a threat that could change the way our world is organized,” and (as others have already noted) the third and final film in the franchise — released too late to be included in the manuscript, but exemplifying many of its conclusions — can be convincingly read as an open call for fascism in the name of security. Even a notionally revolutionary film like *V for Vendetta*, whose Guy Fawkes iconography has been so enthusiastically taken up by anarchists and members of the Occupy movement, is revealed by Hassler-Forest to be just another instance of this conservative fantasy of restoration — transforming a future fascist nightmare back into our “neoliberal, multicultural consumer society in which people are basically passive spectators” gawking at a thrilling fireworks show. Over and over we find each of these films denying the possibility that an Event could ever be allowed to happen, could ever bring anything but unfathomable, incomprehensible disaster.

It is here, argues Hassler-Forest, that the contemporary superhero film’s preoccupation with parents, especially fathers, becomes so crucial. Drawing on Žižek and Lacan, Hassler-Forest finds a superhero narrative endlessly replaying an Oedipal drama of confrontation with the Father. Superman has two dead fathers; Nolan’s Batman has one murdered biological father, one dead adoptive father (Ra’s al Ghul), and at least three symbolic living ones. Spider-Man has a biological father who dies while he is a child and an Uncle Ben he has guiltily allowed to die when he becomes an adult. Iron Man has a disappointed dead father whose memory and legacy he can never live up to; X-Men sees Xavier-as-benign-patriarch battling Magneto-as-evil-one; Heroes has an entire clandestine conspiracy’s worth of mothers and fathers orchestrating all events from behind the scenes and beyond their graves; and on and on. This preoccupation with fathers goes beyond the expected metaphorical relationship with an all-seeing, all-knowing surveillance state apparatus, a theme *Capitalist Superheroes* separately develops in its readings of 24, Hellboy, and the Nolan Batman franchise. The confrontation with the Father becomes in its purest form the ultimate realization of the time-travel fantasy of restoration that is at the core of the post-9/11 superhero myth; we can solve the crises of the twenty-first century and even prevent 9/11 itself by going back in time to childhood, and to patriarchy, by making peace with and finally becoming our dads.

But of course this is an old story; superhero franchises of the past decade are by no means the first or the only stories to conclude that what we really need to do is trust the authority of wizened fathers. Where *Capitalist Superheroes* is at its most invigorating is in its exploration of how this fantasy of return is no longer functional in the modern context. As much as superhero narrative seems to long to fulfill a fantasy of restoration, the mechanism always breaks down. In Heroes, Batman, and X-Men, for instance, we find “laws of the fathers” operating on all sides of the game, simultaneously orchestrating contradictory byzantine gambits, none of which are ever successful in reestablishing the originary patriarchal order the internal logic of these narratives suggests we crave. The end of Superman’s arc in *Superman Returns* similarly short-circuits the return to patriarchal authority and sexual union that might in another cultural moment have given the story a “happy” ending: sacrificing both Lois and their son to the care of another, inferior father, a cuckolded, self-abnegating Superman becomes as phantasmagoric in his own way as Marlon Brando’s ethereal Jor-El in the icy Fortress of Solitude.

We can return here to Eco, and to a fantasy of supermen whose immense masculine power is simultaneously always essentially impotent and sterile. These superheroes embody deep contradictions in the patriarchal fantasies they nominally attempt to reinvigorate: sons without dads, dads without sons, heroes who can’t make anything happen. The “nostalgic desire for an earlier form of modern capitalism . . . accompanied by patriarchal forms of authority” that Hassler-Forest identifies in *Capitalist Superheroes* as the ideological core of the superhero myth thus at the same time always reveals how the old order, now fractured, can never be made whole again. Superman never actually makes a better world for us, or restores the lost one; he simply returns, and returns, and returns, and returns.