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**Pop Culture and Class Conflict in the  
Marvel Cinematic Universe**

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# Pop Culture and Class Conflict in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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In my teens, I often ridiculed Superman's origin story. The disaster sci-fi premise that Krypton's planetary core would explode due to overmining, and that Krypton's world government would dismiss the overwhelming evidence pointing to their imminent extinction, seemed so ludicrous that I refused to read Superman comics for years. Flash forward fifteen years later and I cannot help but to admire the authors' understanding that governments would rebuff empirical evidence that contradicted their ideological beliefs. In this vein, I believe that *capitalism*, *U.S. imperialism*, *patriarchy*, and *white supremacy*, are the primary and interconnected political struggles of our time, which must be resolved to avoid the complete and total collapse of human civilization. Comic book films are a great place to think about these political questions. They have been ignored by leftists as legitimate texts due to "culture industry" like arguments similarly directed at Hollywood films by Marxist scholars (Rushton 2013), and by regular audiences who view them as apolitical, or as "just a movie." However, we should not be so quick to dismiss them, as they can serve as a window into hegemonic beliefs within society. As with all commodities produced by the culture industry, mass production means the audience will be overwhelmingly working-class (Hall 2018a, 350-1).

It stands to reason then that anyone interested in class politics should dedicate time and effort to understand the messages producers of these films wish to impart, how those messages are received by a mostly working-class audience, and in turn how they influence the production not only of future films, but of working class-politics.

My goal for this paper is to present a distilled version of my dissertation on the politics of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)<sup>1</sup>. While my dissertation focuses extensively on the portrayal of race and gender, the scope of this article will focus on how the MCU deals with the capitalist class (those who own the businesses, the factories, etc.) and working-class (those who do not own the businesses and factories). Before we begin the analysis there is one particular term we need to define to move forward, and that term is hegemony. What is important to know about hegemony is that while a common internet search will define it as dominance, it is not a form of domination where one class always forcefully dominates the other. Instead, it works a lot by making the subordinate class internalize the perspective of the dominant one. The MCU wants us to view capitalism as a fair economic system and the United States as a force for good in the world. This is what a Marxist like Antonio Gramsci calls a "hegemonic" perspective, or the viewpoint of the ruling class, which acts as society's "common sense," and "traditional popular conception of the world." (Gramsci 2008a, 199; Gramsci 2008b, 362). In the MCU and in our world that hegemonic perspective is reflective of the interests of a tiny capitalist class which owns a majority of the world's resources.

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<sup>1</sup>If you're interested in the full dissertation, please read it here  
<https://collections.ctdigitalarchive.org/islandora/object/20002:860653361#>

Meanwhile, the majority of the population makes up the working-class, those who do not own those resources and therefore are forced to sell their labor to make a living. For example, if in your life you have ever believed that one gets rich through hard work, you have internalized the beliefs of the hegemonic capitalist class. When the hegemony of the ruling class is strong, most people will go about their life without challenging it, and in their silence consenting to it. However, when there is a crisis of hegemony, meaning that a subordinate class is putting up a counter-hegemonic challenge to the hegemonic class, we will witness direct and forceful interventions by the hegemon. This is where superheroes generally come in. According to David Graeber's (2015, 120) *Utopia of Rules* comic-book stories maintain capitalist hegemony by reproducing a pattern of storytelling where the villains challenge the hegemonic order and cause a crisis, only for the hero to beat them down and return the world to its original order.

MCU films typically portray a villain with legitimate motivations for destabilizing the current world order, only for them to be ultimately revealed as irrational or selfish. The heroes are then called in to return what was an already dysfunctional world back to its original dysfunctional order (Graeber 2015). This is especially the case with working-class villains whose motives are fueled by their own poverty or that of others, and whose motives generally resonate better than the capitalist villains just looking to get richer. There are two levels of hegemony at play here.

The first occurs inside the universe of the MCU, where the superheroes forcefully respond to the crisis on behalf of the hegemonic class by punishing the villains who challenged the world order.

The second occurs externally with us as the audience. We are not so subtly told that if we challenge the hegemonic class, the state will push back through the police and military. However, more subtly, the films are making us identify with the heroes who return the world back as it was, with all its injustices and inequalities, rather than with the villains who tried to change it.

These crises in hegemony unfold a little differently depending on which Phase <sup>2</sup> of the MCU is in question. I will begin with a class analysis of the protagonists and antagonists. From there I describe how their role in the films works to reassert certain hegemonic norms about capitalism and US imperialism. Both the capitalists and working-class' trajectories have clearly defined emergent patterns depending on whether they are the heroes, or the villains. For example, the capitalist characters fall into two categories: if they are villains, then they have simply followed the logic of capitalism and tried to maximize profit at all costs, which, in this case, often requires betraying their country for profit; if they are heroes, then—contrary to the capitalist villain—they act outside their own class interest in the short-term and utilize their wealth to engage in heroic actions to restore faith in capitalism in the long-term. If they are working-class villains, they are motivated by topical societal grievances such as wealth inequality, alienation from their work, access to healthcare, and racism. On the flipside if they are working-class superheroes, they will work hand in hand with capitalist superheroes to end the class conflict.

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<sup>2</sup> The MCU is broken down in Phases of films and shows. Phase 4 is the current phase at the time of this writing.

It is not a coincidence that the MCU's protagonist in the *Infinity Saga*<sup>3</sup> is the US American billionaire turned superhero, Tony Stark, very much an allegory for the capitalist media sensation, Elon Musk.<sup>4</sup> US American media has often favored telling stories of the wealthy, using “positive images...to make us believe that they are deserving of their wealth” (Kendall 2011, 11).

By presenting positive images of a capitalist character, the MCU secures hegemony for capitalism and assures that we will view capitalists as individuals rather than as a class. To discuss how the MCU ensures capitalist hegemony, I will break down the topic of class into two main sub-sections. The first will deal with the MCU's choice to prioritize Stark as the focal character and, in general, how “moral” capitalist characters, such as he and Hank Pym, serve to save capitalism from “evil” capitalist characters. The second section will focus on our primary working-class heroes Spider-Man and Ant-Man and how they reinforce capitalist hegemony by internalizing capitalism's morality rather than identifying with the viewpoints of the working-class villains. The section will also discuss how the MCU routinely tries to undermine the working-class villains' grievances. The final section will explain how the MCU's goal to maintain capitalist hegemony has the potential to backfire.

#### a. “The Merchant of Death”

While arguments can be made that Steve Rogers, Captain America, is the moral center of the MCU during the *Infinity Saga*, his role is severely restricted in comparison to Stark's. This can be easily proven from a simple accounting of appearances. Stark never had to share the limelight in any of his feature films.

He was always clearly the protagonist of the *Iron Man* trilogy. Rogers, on the other hand, also had a trilogy of films, but *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo and Russo 2016) featured a cast larger than that found in the first two Avengers films and features Stark as an equally important, if not more important, character than Rogers himself. When we also take into consideration Stark's presence as a recurring character and mentor to Peter Parker in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Watts 2017), as well as Parker's sense of loss in trying to live up to his mentor in *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (Watts 2019), it is easy to see how Stark, more than Rogers, is the MCU's main character.

It is not by accident that the MCU chose Stark as its focal character. This version of Stark is very much a product of the War on Terror and the Obama presidency. From his first scene, he comes across as a popular figure that appeals to everyone (Favreau 2008). Despite his enormous wealth and status, we see him chatting with the soldiers in his convoy who are there to protect him. He jokes with them and takes selfies, which masks the reality that the War on Terror has allowed weapons' manufacturers like Stark to make massive profits at the expense of soldiers protecting him and, most notably, the people targeted by his weapons. Stark comes off as genial and charismatic, which deceptively hides his class' authoritarian tendencies. If we compare him to his mentor, Obadiah Stane, we can see that capitalists have an easier time maintaining their hegemony when they use Stark's softer approach over Stane's forceful one. Stane does not sugarcoat his power in the same way Stark does, therefore we are clearly meant to identify him as a villain.

<sup>3</sup> *The Infinity Saga* represents the first twenty-three MCU movies starting with *Iron Man* (Favreau 2008) in Phase 1, to *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (Watts 2019) as the final installment of Phase 3.

<sup>4</sup> Who is actually featured in a quick cameo at the beginning of *Iron Man 2* (Favreau 2010).

Stark, on the other hand, is an entertainer, philanthropist, and populist, who gives the illusion that, regardless of his massive wealth and power, he is ultimately one of the people. When, in *Iron Man 2*, a Mexican street vendor says he believes in Stark, one is left to wonder what the two could possibly have in common? The vendor is not privy to Stark's impending death or relationship troubles with Pepper Potts, yet he is under the impression that a billionaire needs his solidarity based on his seemingly depressed mood. Stark has done nothing to deserve his solidarity, but because he is able to present capitalism with a human face, it is mistakenly assumed that he is reciprocally in solidarity with working-class people.

The MCU reinforces capitalist hegemony by presenting us with a hero like Stark who appears relatable due to his internal struggle over how he built his wealth through designing and selling weapons, while making him battle other capitalist villains like Stane, Hammer, and Aldrich. All three *Iron Man* villains are successful capitalists, who cannot quite match up to Stark's genius. Nor do they have the same likeability that he brings to the table, except for Aldrich, who undergoes a radical transformation to present himself as a suave businessman. All three of them, however, behave like traditional capitalists whose "boundless drive for enrichment" guides their actions (Marx 1981, 254). All three villains' ploys to maximize profit rely on their betrayal of the US government, which is meant to signal they must be morally compromised. In *Iron Man 3* (Black 2013), Aldrich pulls back the mask on capitalism a little further and is shown purposefully escalating the War on Terror to generate mass panic and ensure that his Extremis project, with the help of the corrupt Vice President of the US, will become a staple weapon of the US military.

One of the main ways the MCU encourages capitalist hegemony is by introducing valid critiques of capitalism into its stories. Aldrich's plan to escalate the War on Terror by playing both sides is not different from what weapons' manufacturers and their lobbyists ensured the US government would do with the Iraq War (Hughes 2007). The war efforts expanded to include engineering companies to rebuild Baghdad and a heavy role for private military companies, such as Blackwater, that were involved in a number of human rights abuses (K. Johnston 2009, 95-6; Saner 2016). Aldrich remarks, "Anonymity, Tony. Thanks to you, it's been my mantra ever since, right? You simply rule from behind the scenes. Because the second you give evil a face, a Bin Laden, a Gaddafi, a Mandarin, you hand the people a target" (Black 2013). Aldrich's monologue essentially explains how capitalism operates daily, with corporations and stockholders making decisions behind closed doors, influencing capitalist governments to act in their interests by profiting from crises that they often create (Klein 2007). The framing of Aldrich's actions and his eventual defeat by the hands of "good" capitalists, Stark and Potts, ensures that what initially appears as a systemic critique of capitalism is reduced to the moral and immoral actions of individuals.

This pattern is repeated in *Ant-Man* (Reed 2015), with the introduction of capitalist scientist Hank Pym, his daughter Hope von Dyne, and his mentee Darren Cross, who takes over Pym's company and tries to replicate the Pym Particle to generate greater profits for the company. We are again presented with a dichotomy of moral capitalists versus immoral capitalists. Pym, who is fearful of his work being utilized irresponsibly, purposely sabotaged and hid the existence of the Pym Particle from his mentee Cross, who instead zealously attempts to weaponize it.

As with *Iron Man*'s villains, Cross' interest in developing this technology is to sell to both the US government and villainous groups like HYDRA and the Ten Rings. Through the presence of Stark and Pym, the MCU digs its way out of its own surface-level critique that capitalists are villains. By presenting us with capitalist superheroes whose main drive is not maximizing profit, the MCU tries to underplay the systemic conditions that require that capitalists constantly generate new profits to stay in business, all the while making common unethical business practices individual character flaws rather than a systemic feature of capitalism.

One of the elements that the MCU cannot hide as well about capitalism is the inherent authoritarianism of capitalists even when they are doing their best to mask it (Wolff 2012, 15). Stark and Pym, just like their capitalist antagonists, are used to getting their way. It is no surprise, therefore, to see Stark routinely undermine group efforts with no regard for the consequences. In *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon 2015), he bullies Bruce Banner into activating Ultron, which ultimately leads to disastrous consequences in South Africa, South Korea, and Sokovia, where millions of lives are placed at risk and thousands die. In *Captain America: Civil War*, Stark unilaterally decides for the Avengers that they need to sign the Sokovia Accords, which only come into being because Ultron almost wiped out humanity in the battle of Sokovia. "There's no decision-making process here," Stark explicitly tells the Avengers, who are debating the potential ramifications of their missions being decided by the UN (Russo and Russo 2016).

Perhaps, Stark's most obvious display of authoritarianism occurs when he simply stops following the rules of the Sokovia Accords as soon as he disagrees with the government assertion that Bucky was responsible for the UN bombing. By the end of the film, the heroes working with Rogers were arrested for breaking the Accords. Stark instead lies to the Secretary of State and follows Rogers and Bucky to uncover who is behind the UN bombing. Stark's class status allows him to ignore the rules that would govern the remaining superheroes. Stark nonchalantly walks away from the Sokovia Accords at the first sign of trouble with no consequences to his business or ability to be a superhero. A pillar of authoritarianism is when rules are not applied equally due to status (Wolin 2008, 46).

Stark's class status allows him to skirt the very rules he sought to impose on his superhero colleagues. When Rogers breaks out his comrades from prison, none of them can fully avoid the consequences of their actions. Hawkeye is forced to retire and leave the Avengers permanently,<sup>5</sup> Ant-Man is placed under house arrest, and Captain America, Scarlet Witch, and the Falcon become wanted criminals, forced to continue doing their work in secret. The MCU is unconcerned with Stark's quick about-face regarding the Sokovia Accords. If anything, the audience is supposed to applaud the swagger with which he ignores the Secretary of State's requests to help locate Captain America. This is a prime example of how the MCU secures consent for capitalism. Stark's rejection for rules that would otherwise apply to anyone without his wealth and status elicits the very opposite of a rebellious response from the audience.

<sup>5</sup> The Disney+ series *Hawkeye* (Igla 2021), shows Barton attempt to move on with his superhero life and spend more time with his family, but past events that he feels responsible for, pull him back in, even when they are not arguably his responsibility to fix.

Rather than causing audience members to view this as an injustice, his refusal to abide by the rules gives Stark a renegade swagger that makes him look “cool.” A surface-level viewing of these films could easily leave us with simple associations about Stark and his effectiveness. In doing so, the MCU promotes the idea that powerful individual men should ignore society’s laws because they make morally correct decisions (Robin 2018, 170).

The MCU presents us with another authoritarian capitalist superhero in Pym, the original Ant-Man. He entraps Scott Lang into becoming the new Ant-Man and into taking on a dangerous mission to sabotage Cross’ progress on the dissemination of the Pym particle. Lang was a working-class felon, who was arrested for being a whistleblower in his company and returning stolen money to the customers. Upon exiting prison, he cannot find work because of his record and is driven back to crime. This is when we get to see Pym’s authoritarian tendencies in action. He could easily recruit Lang and pay him a stipend for the job he wants him to do; instead, he sets up an elaborate trap to lure Lang into stealing from his mansion. Lang breaks into Pym’s safe and is promptly arrested. While in police custody, Pym sneaks in and blackmails him to wear the Ant-Man suit and help him, or to languish in prison again. The tone of *Ant-Man* is comedic, which purposefully minimizes the cruelty of Pym’s actions, but had Lang disagreed to wear the Ant-Man suit, he would have surely been convicted again. Capitalist hegemony is reinforced because the film makes light of this cruel behavior on the part of Pym and subsequently distracts the viewer from reflecting on the power differences between the two characters through special effects. Moreover, the authoritarian tendencies of the capitalist characters are easily disguised because the MCU’s working-class heroes

have heartedly internalized their morality of self-reliance to their own detriment.

#### **b. The Name is Parker, Peter Parker**

The MCU consolidates support for capitalism by making the capitalist protagonists share an emotional tie to working-class characters (Kendall 2011, 29). Pym, for example, manipulates Lang to wear the Ant-Man suit because he knows that Lang is a father like himself, who is trying to protect and win his daughter’s affection. After Pym’s wife, Janet von Dyne, disappeared in the Quantum Realm, Pym became distanced from his daughter and secluded himself from the world, emotionally abandoning her in a time of grief. Similarly, Lang’s arrest has physically distanced him from his daughter Cassie, who nonetheless, during his absence, remained emotionally attached. Pym tugs on Lang’s heartstrings by telling him that the work he would do as Ant-Man would create a safer world for his daughter and give him a chance to be the father Pym could not be for Hope von Dyne. In proper Hollywood fashion, Lang is moved by this and agrees to help him. These scenes solidify the emotional connection between the capitalist superhero and his working-class protégé and serve to humanize Pym, who initially comes off as a cantankerous and manipulative man. It also conveniently erodes the class antagonism between Pym and Lang, which would otherwise be front and center, especially in light of Pym entrapping and blackmailing Lang. Emotional connections between capitalist and working-class characters are crucial in generating capitalist hegemony, because they reinforce the idea that individuals can always relate to each other regardless of socio-economic differences, even when this is usually not the case.

We see a similar dynamic at play between Stark and Peter Parker. Stark seeks out Parker's help in reigning in Captain America's group of heroes who refuse to register under the Sokovia Accords and offers him an upgrade by providing him with the signature red and blue comic-book Spider-Man suit. Parker is immediately bedazzled by the fact that Stark is in his living room and the two share a bond, specifically over their scientific and technological prowess. Stark is impressed with Parker's spiderwebs, especially since he is a working-poor student in Queens with few resources. The affinity between the two, however, does not erase the inherent power dynamic between Stark and Parker. When Parker disobeys Stark's directions to back off the Vulture in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, Stark—much like an employer disciplining an employee—takes away Parker's suit and places him in danger to teach him a lesson about self-reliance.

The interaction is played off to convey that Parker's overconfidence in being Spider-Man has made him too attached to the Spider-Man suit as a solution to his problems rather than relying on himself. Stark sees this as a moral failure, despite completely relying on a superpowered suit to win his own battles. The hegemonic purpose of the scene is to teach us, through Parker, that we must all rely on ourselves first. What goes unsaid, however, is that Parker would have never interfered in the FBI operation had Stark been transparent and told him how he was going to handle the Vulture with the intel Parker provided him. Instead, Stark withheld that information from Parker and expected him to follow his orders blindly, in the same way that capitalists expect workers to comply with orders that make little sense without knowing the full picture.

Despite the power imbalance and the obvious hypocrisy in Stark's punishment, the MCU works to reinforce capitalist hegemony by having Parker atone for his interference by taking on the Vulture without the Spider-Man suit. It is only after he is almost killed and stops the Vulture that Stark welcomes him back to the Avengers and tries to offer an additional upgrade to his suit. Parker genially declines his offer to instead stay in Queens and "look out for the little guy"; in doing so, the MCU ensures that there is no bad blood between the two classes represented by Stark and Parker (Watts 2017). The fact remains, however, that Stark did not worry about Parker's safety when he deprived him of the suit, knowing full well that Parker would, nonetheless, attempt to stop the Vulture. The MCU conceals the authoritarian aspect of their relationship by reducing the conflict to one of moral failure by Parker, rather than representative of an unequal power dynamic between an owner and a worker.

As Ant-Man and Spider-Man are the only two specifically identified working-class superheroes, part of their charm is seeing them deal with the ordinary. Lang deals with the hardships of being a working-class convict trying to reenter society. In addition to his employment struggles, we also see how this impacts his ability to see his daughter, since he cannot afford child support payments to his ex-wife. The presentation of his misfortune, however, is always comedic and never tragic, which helps the audience digest that he is blackmailed and gaslighted by Pym into becoming Ant-Man and not doing so out of his own volition. We also see him under house-arrest for much of *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, dealing with the consequences of his choice to back Captain America over Iron Man. Parker, for his part, deals with the growing pains of a working-class high schooler who does not have the financial resources of his peers.



He is routinely bullied by Flash Thompson, who is the son of an upper middle-class family and flaunts his wealth to shame Parker. The issue with these scenes is that they never try to dig deeper. Their struggles are window-dressing to make our heroes seem relatable, but never take front and center within the plot.

In fact, one of the notable differences between the MCU's Spider-Man and Sam Raimi's version, is the portrayal of Aunt May. In the MCU, even though Aunt May similarly finds herself as the sole breadwinner after the death or disappearance of Uncle Ben,<sup>6</sup> she is not shown struggling to pay the bills. Instead, because she is younger than Raimi's version, we see her employed in an office and capable of sending her nephew on seemingly expensive school trips to Washington DC in *Homecoming*, and to Europe in *Far From Home*. We only tangentially see that Parker lives in project housing during *Civil War*, but it never becomes an important plot point. This is a radical departure from Raimi's *Spider-Man 2* (2004), where Aunt May and Parker head to the bank, pleading the bank officer to refinance her home as it risks being foreclosed, only for the officer to deny them on the basis that they do not have the assets to secure the loan. Notably absent from the MCU's version of Spider-Man is Parker's struggle paying rent at his slumlord's apartment while taking pictures for the Daily Bugle and delivering pizzas. Whereas Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002) makes Parker's lack of financial security a major plot component, the MCU makes Parker's poor economic means an afterthought.

The overall result is that we get a Spider-Man that feels less "friendly neighborhood" and more James Bond-like, with a capitalist providing him with various gadgets to work on his behalf. In doing so, the MCU transforms its working class heroes into enforcers of capitalism, who are heavily militarized like US police forces.

Notwithstanding Spider-Man's working-class roots within the comics (DiPaolo 2011), the MCU pays homage to them in relatively superficial ways. In *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, we see Spidey help an older woman with directions, stop a bicycle thief, and mistakenly attack a young person locked out of their car to the dismay of the neighborhood, which is disturbed by the car alarm. Regardless of these genuine moments of Spider-Man helping working-class people, the role of this Spider-Man is more to herd working-class folks into obeying the laws of capitalism. For example, Spider-Man confronts Aaron Davis, an African American ex-felon who tried to purchase a weapon from Toomes' thugs, about the Vulture's location. Davis tells him about Vulture's location immediately because he does not want Toomes' weapons in the neighborhood causing havoc. Spider-Man thanks him for his help and is about to leave when Davis reminds Spider-Man that he webbed his hand to the trunk and that he has perishable groceries in the car. Spider-Man refuses to remove the webbing, telling him it will dissolve in two hours and that he deserves it because he is a criminal. The entire interrogation is comical, with Davis telling Spider-Man he needs to get better at interrogating criminals, but, for the sake of argument, let us read this more seriously.

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<sup>6</sup> In *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Watts 2021), after Aunt May's death, her gravestone is not located next to anyone, implying that Ben Parker may still be alive, and simply have walked away from May and Peter.

Based on Davis' older looking car with plastic and tape covered windshields and our knowledge that he is an African American ex-felon, we can glean that he is clearly struggling financially and returning to crime because capitalism has left him no option. The MCU's message, regardless of its comical delivery, is that the socio-economic circumstances which lead to crime are exempt from scrutiny and that individuals who commit criminal acts are instead solely responsible for their actions. This is a typical media framing of the working-class and unemployed, attributing their status as self-inflicted. In comparison to Raimi's Spider-Man, the MCU's version is a lot less empathetic, and it likely has to do with the studio's decision to intimately tie his character with Stark.

In the case of the MCU, Spider-Man's villains are specifically targeting Stark for destroying their livelihoods, which seems to act as an internal critique by the studio of Stark's callousness toward workers. His treatment of his bodyguard/head of security, Happy Hogan, is demonstrative of how little he values his employees. We see Stark bullying Hogan in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* as he makes fun of him in front of Parker for asking to be promoted from Head of Security to Risk Assessment Management. Immediately afterward, Stark assigns Hogan as Parker's contact and instructs him not to get Hogan too riled up because he saw his cardiogram and is worried about him, only to then order Hogan to carry Parker's heavy metallic suitcase up seven floors. Parker graciously intervenes and says that he can do it himself, but it is a display of the casual

cruelty of capitalists and Parker's respect for a fellow working-class person.

For as much as the MCU allows the villains to criticize capitalism through their grievances with Stark, they never take this line of critique all the way, which is to ask, why are so many of Stark's villains victims of his company? Spider-Man, as the working-class hero, sometimes sympathizes with them, but ultimately ensures that none of their plans take fruition. Even in Phase 1, *Iron Man 2* presents us with the initially sympathetic working-class villain, Ivan Vanko. We start the film witnessing his father dying while on the TV Tony Stark reveals to the world that he is Iron Man. The older Vanko listens to the television in regret, lamenting that it should be his son in Stark's place. Moments after his father's death, Vanko builds a suit to confront Iron Man, and we quickly learn that Stark's miniaturized Arc Reactor in his chest was partially engineered by Vanko's father and not just Stark's. A little over halfway through the film, however, Nick Fury reveals to Stark that Vanko's father saw the reactor as a means to become rich, and therefore Howard Stark had him deported back to the Soviet Union. This scene is pivotal in delegitimizing the younger Vanko's sympathetic quest for revenge. By presenting Anton Vanko's motives as not altruistic, while presenting Howard Stark's as such,<sup>7</sup> the film is choreographing that the younger Vanko's quest for revenge is solely to replace Stark as a wealthy individual, and not an actual critique of capitalism. The hegemonic purpose is to discredit the villain in favor of the hero on the basis that his motivations solely benefit him, thereby deflecting the more fundamental question, why should so much wealth reside in the hands of any individual instead of all of society's?

In *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, Adrian Toomes is the small business-owner of a salvaging company, who obtains a large contract with the city to help with the cleanup efforts after the Chitauri invasion of New York.

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<sup>7</sup> Despite of course the hypocrisy of a capitalist like Howard penalizing someone for wanting to not be poor.

He expands his business, hiring new employees and buying new equipment to be able to complete the job. Stark Industries lobbies the US government and creates a new agency called Damage Control to clean up the city, annulling Toomes' contract. Despite this setback one of Toomes' men points out that they still have a truckload of salvaged alien material, and another one of his men tinkering with the material realizes it can be used to develop new technology. This inspires Toomes to develop powerful weapons that can be sold on the black market. The film depicts Toomes and his men as working-class characters who are one financial crisis away from bankruptcy and utilize their criminal activities to stave off poverty. In his final confrontation with Parker, Toomes tells him that billionaires like Stark do not care what happens to working-class folks like them and that he is completely justified in taking the Chitauri weapons from Stark's arsenal to look out for his family and his crew. When Parker's appeals to his conscience do not work, the film pivots to delegitimizing Toomes on the basis that the weapons he plans to steal are unstable and, unbeknownst to him, will explode over New York City as he attempts to transport them. This narrative-turn creates a simple solution for the conflicted Spider-Man who does not want to harm his high school girlfriend's father. In classical superhero fashion the socio-economic grievances expressed by Toomes and his men are sidestepped for the more immediate world ending event.

In *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, Quentin Beck and all the disgruntled Stark employees create Mysterio Inc. with the intent of having a platform where working-class people will be listened to by world governments. Outside of their mistreatment from working at Stark Industries, their complaints center on alienation from their work, or being separated from what they produced. Beck specifically recounts how he designed a holographic system with "limitless applications," which Stark renamed "Binarily Augmented Retro-Framing or BARF" (Watts, 2019). Soon after, Stark fired Beck. The workers in Mysterio Inc. unite to correct these types of grievances and force the world to recognize their contributions. Yet, very quickly, Beck is delegitimized as "unstable" and forces his coworkers to enact his plan which will result in unnecessary casualties at gunpoint.

In the MCU's Spider-Man films, we never get a flipped scenario where the superhero listens to the grievances of the villain and joins them in their quest or where his antagonist is instead a capitalist. This is strikingly different from Raimi's *Spider-Man*, which showcased Parker fighting Norman Osborn, aka the Green Goblin, a corporate villain trying to consolidate power of his fledgling company while terrorizing New York City. This film series also showed Parker forgiving the Sandman for mistakenly killing his uncle Ben in a desperate robbery to buy medicinal supplies for his daughter (Raimi 2007).

The qualities which make Spider-Man a hero to working-class New Yorkers within the comics are side-stepped in the MCU's version of the character. We are instead treated to a techno-capitalist friendly version intimately tied to Stark, thereby minimizing the conflict between their classes, to reinforce capitalist hegemony. While the third MCU Spider-Man film, *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (Watts 2021), seems to remediate this by having Parker lose his aunt and the entire world forget he exists through a magic spell, it is undeniable that up until that point the MCU's Spider-Man has been in no uncertain terms, Iron Man's lapdog.

This is in contrast to the more middle of the road working-class film, *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (Reed 2019). The film has a more leftwing perspective of class than other entries in the MCU, but it ultimately settles the matter through what could be analogous to healthcare reform. *Ant-Man and the Wasp's* antagonist, Ava (Ghost), is presented as a sympathetic black working-class "villain" who is working with her father's coworker Bill Foster to take Pym's technology so that she can cure herself from a calamity that makes her body phase in and out of existence. Pym's access to the quantum realm is her only chance to potentially cure her condition, which she obtained when her father attempted to perform a dangerous experiment in an unsafe black market lab, where she was struck by the blast. What adds an interesting dimension to this conflict is that Pym is partly responsible for her condition. When Ava's father disagreed with Pym, he was fired from SHIELD and discredited so that he could not work again. Foster, who was a friend of Pym until Ava's father was fired, took her back to SHIELD, where she was promised they would find her a cure.

However, SHIELD lied and weaponized her abilities, forcing her to spy and kill for them. Once SHIELD collapsed after the events of *Captain American: The Winter Soldier* (Russo and Russo, 2014), Ava and Foster were left to their own devices to cure her "molecular disequilibrium" (Reed 2019). Unlike most of these films, where the working-class villain is defeated by the hero to restore order, Ghost and Foster are not killed or arrested. Instead, Janet von Dyne, who manages to return with Ant-Man's help from the Quantum Realm, knows how to save Ava from her condition. Capitalist hegemony is maintained by giving the working class a concession, signifying that systemic issues can be reformed, and revolution is unnecessary.

The final working-class villain I will discuss is Erik Stevens, aka Killmonger, whose goal in *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) is dismantling white supremacy and global capitalism. The film opens with a young T'Challa (Black Panther) asking his father to tell him the history of the fictional African nation of Wakanda. This simple question sets up the primary conflict of the film, showing us, through a CGI retelling of history, how Wakanda thrived hidden away from the world, while the rest of the African continent was ravaged by the West in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and imperialism. The young T'Challa then asks his father why they continue to hide and the film cuts to an Oakland ghetto in 1992, where Stevens is playing basketball in the courtyard with his friends. The scene subsequently shifts to the inside of Stevens' apartment where we learn that Stevens' father, N'Jobu, is King T'Chaka's brother and that he betrayed Wakanda to the mercenary Ulysses Klaue, in order to procure vibranium weapons to African Americans.

N’Jobu confronts his brother telling him millions of African Americans languish in poverty and are forced into slave labor in prison, while Wakanda hoards tools and weapons which could liberate them and working-class people all around the world. He is killed by his brother, and this catapults the young Stevens to seek revenge against the Wakandan monarchy and to fulfill his father’s dream of arming the black working-class. The film props up the Wakandan monarchy as heroes by showing that King T’Challa changes his country’s policy of isolation to one where it will play a major role in the world with its technology. T’Challa is moved by Stevens’ actions, but not enough to tear down capitalism and imperialism.

Instead T’Challa gives Stevens the choice to die from his wounds or to be imprisoned, continuing the legacy Stevens sought to destroy.

### c. The Counter-Hegemonic Viewpoint

Up to this point I have employed a class analysis to one of the most popular cultural industry products in recent years—Marvel comic book movies. In sum, we can see that the MCU features capitalist and working-class heroes working together to ultimately deflect systemic critiques of capitalism and reinforce its hegemony. However, there is a slightly different way to examine these events in the MCU, or what we could call a counter-hegemonic working-class viewpoint.<sup>8</sup> This counter-hegemonic viewpoint in the MCU does not emerge because of the films, rather it is a sign of the MCU responding to anti-capitalist sentiments which have become more mainstream in the last decade.

In both Phases 1 and 2, even if the capitalist villains are stopped by capitalist superheroes to lessen the blow of the systemic critique, the fact remains that Disney felt that its class of shareholders would make good villains. The introduction of Vulture and Mysterio as disgruntled members of the working-class ruined by Stark, is a shift by the studio to contain the counter-hegemonic anti-capitalist viewpoint. While the fact that they are working-class villains in and of itself is not a novel concept, their class critique of Stark is not directed solely at him as an individual, but at an economic system where working-class people are made to suffer to generate profit. These films offer a slightly more systemic critique of capitalism, where Stark’s class status as a capitalist is directly tied to these villains’ rise in class consciousness. By making the MCU’s hero, the author of these villains’ class grievances, Disney inadvertently solidifies the counter-hegemonic position which says that even the so-called “good capitalists” perform an exploitative function that cannot be reformed.

In *Black Panther*, T’Challa tries to correct the mistakes of his father and his predecessors by sharing his country’s resources with the world through a neoliberal framework. Yet, it also makes the villain, Stevens, a more compelling and sympathetic character than its hero. In fact, the film presents T’Challa as somewhat inept at understanding the motivations behind Stevens’ plan and, therefore, less sympathetic than he should be as the film’s protagonist. T’Challa’s failure to offer Stevens a different path than imprisonment, along with the overall pathos of Stevens’ death-scene, is Coogler’s indication that the Wakandan state is ultimately complicit in maintaining an exploitative and racist system. Even though the film tries to redeem the Wakandan monarchy, there is a counter-hegemonic reading that says Stevens “was right.”

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<sup>8</sup> Gramsci argues that it is necessary for the working-class to wrest hegemony from the ruling class and install a counter-hegemonic perspective as the new norm, or a new “common sense.”

Phase 4 is continuing the MCU's pursuit for more gender, racial, and cultural representation, but this representation tends to come with the caveat of funneling all non-white and non-male characters into what Adolph Reed (1979) calls the "administrative apparatus." In other words, the films will contain more representation, but it will in turn require these characters' fealty to capitalism and US imperialist projects. The MCU has doubled down on this formula in recent installments such as *WandaVision* (Shakman 2021), *Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (Skogland 2021), and the *Eternals* (Zhao 2021). In *WandaVision* we are introduced to an adult Monica Rambeau, who was originally introduced as Maria Rambeau's daughter in *Captain Marvel* (Boden and Fleck 2019). We learn that after the events of the first *Captain Marvel*, Maria became the director of SWORD, an agency dealing with interstellar threats. Monica by the end of the show obtains superpowers, but her superhero identity has not been fully disclosed yet and likely will not be until the upcoming film the *Marvels*. She works alongside FBI Agent Woo from *Ant-Man and the Wasp* to stop the corrupt SWORD director Tyler Hayward. Two characters of color are instrumentalized to take down a corrupt version of an administrative agency to then restore its legitimacy.

In the *Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, Sam Wilson wrestles with a related quandary of state legitimation—namely, Captain America's choice to pass him the shield at the conclusion of the *Infinity Saga*. Wilson does not believe Rogers can be replaced and returns the shield to the US State Department. Instead of honoring his wishes to place the shield in the Smithsonian, the State Department nominates John Walker as the new Captain America, who unlike Rogers is

a good soldier, but not necessarily a good man. What further complicates matters is that Wilson learns that he would not have been the first black Captain America, as Isaiah Bradley and other black veterans, after Rogers' presumed demise in WWII, were experimented on and given the Super Soldier Serum. Out of all the candidates the serum worked the best with Bradley, who was subsequently arrested by the US government and experimented on for thirty years, until a nurse helped him declare himself dead and escape. Despite Bradley confronting Wilson about the horrific racist legacy of Captain America, which calls to mind the Tuskegee Experiment, Wilson opts to take on the mantle of his old friend, with the rationalization that his Captain America, unlike Walker's, will not be under the supervision of the US State Department.

Wilson's decision to become the new Captain America, regardless of Bradley's warning, is the hegemon's way of redirecting anger against state sanctioned white supremacy; the gesture assures us white supremacy is not inherent to the US's values as a nation. The final moment of cooptation occurs in the finale, when Wilson memorializes Bradley as the first black Captain America in the Smithsonian. The scene comes off as jarring, to say the least. In previous episodes, Bradley showed no concern for the recognition of his service. In fact, he was presented as rightly angry at the life stolen from him in the service of US imperialism. Hegemonically, as if by ideological necessity, the US must dedicate a monument to Bradley to nullify the deeper critique of his exploitation by the US armed forces, thus transforming the issue solely to one of recognition.

In the *Eternals*, Phastos, is a black gay man, who in the course of the film is revealed to have helped the US create its first atomic weapon. While the

Manhattan Project did have numerous black scientists employed in research and development, the film portrays his role as equally important to Oppenheimer's. His exile after the weapon is used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, deflects the US' choice to display its might against the Soviet Union. The first fully fledged gay character in the MCU is immediately made a member of the administrative apparatus, and indirectly responsible for what is arguably one of the cruelest military operations in human history. Similarly, to Isaiah Bradley, the MCU utilizes the diversity of their characters to restore the legitimacy of the US' actions.

It is less clear how the MCU will proceed on class issues in Phase 4 and beyond. After the events of *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, the MCU's Parker will finally resemble his comic book counterpart, being down on his luck in a crumbling apartment in NYC, rather than Stark's mentee and protege. Whether the MCU will inadvertently produce a more left-wing Spider-Man due to this, is unlikely. In fact, it will most certainly find a way to sublimate Spider-Man's working-class politics in a way that will ultimately continue to safeguard capitalism. The middle of the road position taken in *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, is likely more indicative of the path the MCU will take in the future when it comes to reconciling the working-class grievances of its audience. Nonetheless, these shifts in the MCU's narrative are demonstrative of a counter-hegemonic bloc starting to challenge the once unshakable "common sense" of capitalism's rule. As faith in the logic of capitalism continues to deteriorate among the US American working-class, the more likely we are to see the MCU change tactics to reassert capitalism's legitimacy.

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