

The ideology of Nolan's Batman trilogy

DARK KNIGHT, DARK IDEAS

Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy has been critically acclaimed and a huge success at the box office. **Pete Turner** evaluates its exploration of dark themes, and considers accusations of a reactionary ideology.

'You have to become an idea'

After **Joel Schumacher's *Batman and Robin*** was a day-glo disaster in 1997, anyone would think the director had killed off comic book icon Batman for good. But only eight years later, **British director Christopher Nolan** resurrected the dark knight, losing the sidekick, neon lights and rubber nipples in favour of **enhanced realism and contemporary relevance**.

Nolan's focus on Bruce Wayne, the



messed-up man behind the mask, had a number of consequences for the supposedly 'fun' franchise. Leaving the batsuit out of much of the trilogy and setting it in a Gotham City so highly recognisable that it might as well have been called New York, the director seems to have been inviting critics to make **comparisons between the films' events and their contemporary socio-political context**.

Nolan stated in a **Rolling Stone** interview that 'the films genuinely aren't intended to be political' but many have argued otherwise, enforcing their own interpretations on the ideas of the trilogy. Douthat (2012) even goes so far as to argue that

Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy is notable for being much more explicitly right-wing than almost any Hollywood blockbuster of recent memory.

Are these accusations fair or are there some alternative interpretations of Batman's most recent reincarnation?



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Vigilantism, justice and vengeance

The Dark Knight trilogy has led to continued debates that have long existed about Batman as **a symbol of vigilantism, justice, vengeance and even fascism**. He is a force for 'good' who fights criminals by putting on a mask, attacking them in the dark and dishing out his own vigilante justice, uninhibited by the laws, restrictions and corruption that the local police deal with. Bruce Wayne is a character who begins by wanting to take vengeance on the murderer of his parents by attempting to assassinate the criminal. He then joins what some critics have called a 'terrorist training camp' in the mountains, where he is trained to fight his enemies when he returns home. Some see Wayne's Batman as a terrorist who trains with a shadowy league, only to spurn their harsher methods before they finally show up on his doorstep for a 'blowback' that many have seen as reflecting America's involvement with the Taliban before September 11th 2001.

Others have argued that:

just as *The Dark Knight* was a touching tribute to an embattled George W. Bush, who chose to be seen as a villain in order to be the hero, *Rises* is a love letter to an imperfect America that in the end always does the right thing.

Nolte, 2012

In this reading, because Batman takes responsibility for Two-Face's murders at the end of *The Dark Knight*, he is comparable with George W. Bush, who was willing to do America's dirty work in a time of war.

America is the vigilante that has to free itself of the shackles of international laws in order to fight evil wherever it finds it, and mete out its own brand of **justice and revenge for the 9/11 attacks**.

There are many who believe that the American political and military elite hoped for such an attack, as it would give them the

will of the people on their side in order to start more wars and assert more American dominance over the rest of the world. Comic book characters like Batman similarly need an enemy to fight against.

Without an enemy, the virtuous warrior will lose his virile strength; without an uprising, the repressive capacity of the state will grow idle, and sterile.

Bady, 2012

Batman needs disorder, chaos and enemies to attack. He serves the status quo, protecting the **dominant hegemony** of his society. Superheroes, particularly Bruce Wayne with his abundant wealth, benefit from maintaining social structures as they are, or as Meggs (2009, p.4) argues of superheroes:

protecting the status quo gives them countless opportunities to defend it from attack.

By any means necessary – the tactics of Batman

Considering the tactics of Batman over the whole trilogy also sheds light on some cause for concern over this darkest of knights. While Batman is not a killer and certainly not as cheerfully fascist as Judge Dredd's executioner, he is on the other hand 'forced' into some pretty abhorrent acts over the course of the trilogy. In *The Dark Knight*, his interrogation of the Joker becomes brutal, like the torture so eagerly justified by stopping acts of terrorism in real life. Batman then uses a scarily sophisticated and completely illegal surveillance

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technique in order to track down his nemesis. As Bady (2012) states:

Bruce Wayne became the terrorist and Batman became both torturer and operator of a mass surveillance system; it was exactly the point that in fighting the villain, he became the villain.

Some read this as an attack on the behaviour of America while others, Marcotte (2012) included, argued that *The Dark Knight* 'ended with a seeming endorsement of authoritarianism'.

Interrogations that stray into brutality and violating privacy laws are justified in the film by the semi-positive outcomes. The Joker is captured, though there are two major victims of his chaos, and good and evil become such murky concepts that it is no wonder so much of what occurs in *The Dark Knight* looms ominously over the events of *The Dark Knight Rises*. The truth of Harvey Dent's turn to the dark side is eventually used against those who plotted to deceive the masses.

Marcotte even suggests that: **by violating human rights to deal with crime, Gotham opened the door for Bane's extremist reaction.**

This suggests a rather more progressive argument than many have given these recent *Batman* films credit for. Some find the moral murkiness of the films to be more about criticising America's behaviour than celebrating what was achieved through morally dubious tactics. Bady argues that the films show that:

America has become what it says it fights in the process of fighting it – and made it impossible to distinguish good from evil.

Inequality in Gotham

Gotham, although much improved between *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight Rises*, simmers constantly with **class tension**. Bruce Wayne is the notable representative of upper class aristocracy,



a playboy millionaire who inherited his wealth from his parents and who knows nothing of the poverty of the ordinary people of Gotham until he willingly and deliberately throws his wallet away to get a taste of what it is like to feel hunger. The people of Gotham are poor, struggling and desperate. The first real contact with them that Wayne has is when a criminal robs, then kills his parents for their expensive belongings. Douthat (2012) argues that: **the *Batman* movies pretty consistently portray Gotham as corrupt, chaotic, unequal and unjust.**

Those at the top **dupe, intimidate and control the masses**. It is no wonder that many join Bane's army by the finale to fight against inequality in their society. Marcotte (2012) argues that:

watching the super-rich be pulled out of their homes and murdered can be read as a slam against the left, but it felt more like the ugly result of allowing the rich to gobble up too much of the pie in the first place.

While the trilogy shows life for ordinary

Batman does not fight inequality or any of the other factors that might cause increases in criminality.

Gothamites improving over the course of the three films, with less corruption, poverty and organised crime, they also **lack any real suggestion that such fundamental inequalities in wealth are in any way wrong**. Wayne may lose his fortune by Bane's deeds, but his wealth and access to technology is never criticised, even as they talk of the army lacking funds to buy Wayne Enterprises' hardware, or the police not having the resources to catch criminals. Only Bruce Wayne can afford a batsuit, a batmobile and a batplane. The army and the police, funded by tax dollars, will have to do without; but Bruce Wayne, vigilante millionaire, can carry on being the saviour. The films have no 'notion of a structural crisis in capitalism' (Bady, 2012). In *The Dark Knight Rises*' nuclear bomb, **the movie allows Bruce Wayne to invent a technological solution to poverty ... and then discard it.**

Bady, 2012

Though the reactor could have been used as a source of unlimited cheap energy, in the wrong hands (i.e. anyone not as wealthy, noble and wonderful as Bruce Wayne) it is turned into a bomb and therefore must be destroyed. Bady goes so far as to argue that

this decision to not end poverty because you might release a weapon into the public sphere – demonstrates the real driving force for the movie's morality, sense of history, and its understanding of civic virtue: the violence within, which must be contained.

Bady, 2012

Batman is a comic book hero and his job is not to battle inequality but to fight evil villains. The cause of crime is left to his alter-ego Bruce Wayne to occasionally tackle in charitable donations to orphanages and the like. Batman has a **reactionary role**, fighting the bad guys while ignoring the social ailments that cause criminality. In this way he can choose to ignore **more liberal, systemic changes that might have broader effects and challenge dominant institutions and ideology.**

Meggs, 2009

Throughout the trilogy, Nolan is showing that Gotham is split along class divisions; and while he acknowledges the injustices of the ruling elite, he is also **suggesting that both the revolutionary and anarchic alternatives would be much, much worse.**

Douthat, 2012



Gotham's people are seen as docile, useless and incapable of achieving anything worthwhile.



The masses

Karl Marx believed the workers of the world would unite and when they achieved class consciousness, they would revolt against those who had exploited them for too long. However Nolan's films have less faith in the masses. Aside from *The Dark Knight's* climax, Gotham's people are seen as docile, useless and incapable of achieving anything worthwhile. *The Dark Knight* is interesting in that **the film's ideological conflict seems to center around the fundamental worth of humanity, whether it is truly as corruptible as the Joker thinks it is or if it has an essential nobility as Bruce Wayne believes.**

Meggs, 2009

Fortunately at the end of the film, Wayne is proved right: neither the prisoners nor the ordinary people of Gotham choose to blow up each other's bomb-laced ferries as The Joker had hoped they would.

However the masses are more often portrayed as 'a populace content to wait for Batman to save it without doing anything – good or evil – on its own behalf' (Bady,

2012), particularly in the final film. The people of Gotham are nowhere to be seen during the occupation of Gotham. It is left for Batman to release the police force and for them to then fight the uprising of prisoners and disgruntled poor young men who joined Bane. Many see parallels with the **Occupy Wall Street movement** but Bane has no peaceful or noble intentions of fighting for the redistribution of wealth to the 99%. Instead he is simply a puppet of a criminal organisation that wants to watch the world burn. Nolan has addressed the similarities, arguing that he is not critical of Occupy Wall Street but claiming

if the populist movement is manipulated by somebody who is evil; that surely is a criticism of the evil person. You could also say the conditions the evil person is exploiting are problematic and should be addressed.

So though the masses only play a very minor role in their own destiny, the films suggest that there is some inherent decency in the people of Gotham City.

Conclusion: order vs chaos

The Dark Knight trilogy is many things to many people. It throws **post-9/11 concerns about terrorism, justice and retribution** into the decidedly less comic-book-like setting of a very modern and recognisable Gotham City. Some consider it wilfully right-wing, even more than the idea of a wealthy vigilante ever formerly suggested. Others consider it more **balanced in its ideology**, arguing that its approaches to crime and capitalism are far from simplistic. Nolte (2012) praises the final film for being **mostly about a rousing defence of an America under siege by a demagogue disguising his nihilistic rage and thirst for revenge and power as a noble quest for equality.**

Marcotte (2012) argues that **there are no easy dichotomies. By the end of the third film, a clear argument for balance between authoritarianism in the name of order and an anarchist view of people power emerges.**

It all ultimately comes back to Batman

and his villains: **agents of chaos versus an agent of order.** Batman does not fight inequality or any of the other factors that might cause increases in criminality. Bruce Wayne is a privileged playboy who can do as he pleases, but chooses not to change the system for the good of the people. At the end of the day, **by not seeking to create a radically new system of government or social structure, he ensures that he will always be needed.**

Meggs, 2009

And with a reboot expected in 2017, you can bet he always will be.

Pete Turner is undertaking a PhD at Oxford Brookes University, writes a film blog at <http://ilovethatfilm.blogspot.com/> and is currently writing a book on *The Blair Witch Project*.

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