

Justice in the World of The Punisher

Paul Buhle

2024

a review of

A Cultural History of The Punisher: Marvel Comics and the Politics of Vengeance by Kent Worcester. University of Chicago Press, 2023

Literally hundreds of comic books and graphic novels bear the imprint, directly and indirectly, of one luminous character: the Punisher. Most of us know little about this ultra-violent global icon who has been around since 1974 and continues to draw millions of readers. That the Punisher seems so deeply ambivalent, heroic or anti-heroic by turns, is obviously key to his status.

Operating outside the law, imposing his own decisions, he remains the most political of the Marvel characters, but political in a sense that most of us cannot quite grasp or accept as legitimate. The Punisher, like a character from a nineteenth century Russian novel, might easily inspire direct action against injustice, even action in the name of anarchist causes.

Worcester explains on the first page that this character, who sometimes seems to be channeling white, male rage, is also expressing the effects of shame and humiliation. Wounded masculinity here is to be illustrated if not quite openly celebrated, but in any case remains painfully unresolved. The ideal society presumably craved by his birth-name-identity, Frank Castle, remains elusive to the reader, and would in any case need to resolve an issue inescapable in the Punisher narrative: women's self-assertion.

Much as Punisher deals out endless blows to the persecutors of women, he cannot see gender relations beyond his narrow and violent perspective. And then again, who are the readers attracted to the Punisher? Males with the same limitations.

Punisher, Worcester tells us, is "at the center of one of the most significant developments in mainstream comic books over the last half century: the emergence (in the 1970s) and success (in the 1980s) of a new strain of (anti)heroism, one that promises carnage rather than benevolent intervention."

The world of superheroes at large has become, across the last two generations, a world of constant, organized violence. Yesteryear's Superman, Batman, et al., were restoring a peacefulness considered normal even in Metropolis or Gotham City. Across the last two generations, that normality has slipped away, and the dangers do not come mostly from outer space or from abnormal abilities of deviants.

This development might easily place anarchism, the history and philosophy of anarchism, in another light. Acting outside of the law has been normalized. The problems and also the opportunities may be seen afresh. But first, the problems radiating through popular culture as well as politics and war, need to be viewed a little more closely.

The scholarly literature on comic art has mushroomed from slight, up to the 21st century, into several university series, many trade press items, and at least a couple of on-line journals. Not so long ago, non-PhD but scholarly-minded "fans" did the research and wrote the books and articles, as a concomitant to collecting, which itself gained new status with the rising money-value of old comic art.

So much more has been produced and is now being produced along the line of comics studies. Yet there has been no volume with this level of erudition on an individual, charismatic, best-selling character. They may be coming

in preparation for academic career advancement or even the joy of younger comic-fans seeing themselves in print, but not here yet.

Marvel features have by now swamped Star Wars in every sense, and cannot fairly be charged with turning Hollywood back into cowboys-and(alien) Indians. We are in the post-pop age, with signifiers outpacing anything specifically attributable to plot and character.

Without violence, where would the Marvel franchise be? The projection of teenage angst, especially a craving for some kind of revenge against some malefactor in a very sick modern society, is arguably the strain of continuity through comics since their revival in the 1970s.

The incredible twists and turns of salesmanship that found gay characters, black characters, anti-violence violence, also found (after a sixty-year lapse) open identification of Jewishness true to the field of artists and writers. Proliferation in titles and characters demanded variety.

The Punisher is the violent character who becomes increasingly so as publishers and readers continually reflect and redirect the scope of violence in the real world. Before 1970, with inevitable exceptions, violence could only be the action of the wicked, or performed, with caution, for purposes of good. Worcester argues that we find the cause of the Punisher at the dawn of Reaganism and the rhetoric of “violence in the streets” caused by racial minorities and others tolerated in the guise of social permissiveness. Logically, the Punisher makes his first appearance in 1974.

Who is Punisher aka Frank Castle? As Worcester explains, he may be a damaged veteran of the Vietnam War, in later generations, of the Iraq or Afghani conflicts. He learned how to beat and to kill, and walk away without being arrested. One could write him off as a rightwing nut. But Worcester sees him “as an overdetermined site of cultural production,” the expression of his writers and artists. Literally hundreds of comic books and graphic novels.

Worcester argues at length, and very persuasively, that the roots of this character can be found in the genre of the 19th century Western and closer in time, to the emergence of violence in hugely popular films. A fine scholar of the Pan African thinker C.L.R. James, Worcester missed an opportunity to plumb one of James’s lesser works, an unfinished manuscript finally published after his 1989 death, pointing to the public clamor for revenge against the terrible effects of the Depression. “The Public Enemy,” a huge surprise hit of the early 1930s, established the bad guy who would come to grief in the end, but lashed out at the falsity of social relations under capitalism.

The Punisher is a little like Edward G. Robinson, but not so emotionally needful, by a long shot. He is not robbing banks so much as bashing restless minorities on the streets. The social quality of the crime story so evident in 1950s-70s television shows, almost vanished in “Hill Street Blues” as the unworthy almost begged to be bagged, thumped, and put away. But those men (and some women) in blue believed at least in courts and prison sentences. The Punisher regards such measures as inadequate and downright cowardly. Real men take direct action.

Liberal democracy is hopelessly inadequate to the tasks at hand. Spider-Man and Daredevil, among other superhero types, only seek something that amounts of propping up a hopelessly decadent system. Punisher wants to overthrow the system, even if he has nothing beyond his own individual action to put in its place.

Punisher, popular enough to join the Marvel line-up during the 1980s-90s, not only brought in book-buyers, but encouraged brand expansion like t-shirts and posters. In the Reagan era, anger and resentment could be monitored if not controlled. By the 1990s, any remaining sign of Reagan-style optimism had apparently vanished. Vigilantism found its targets not only among street criminals, but also the elites. For a while, each new series became more bloodthirsty and ruthless, then sales faded into a foggy if by no means liberal eclecticism. He got to join the Marvel Family as a sort of troubled relative.

In the end, all this winds down into parody and confusion, echoed in troubling successors like the Foolkiller whose world includes mass rapes, mass hangings and body parts, a new violence appropriate to the America of deindustrialization and widespread despair. The principal scriptwriter of *The Punisher*, Mike Baron, is asked at the end of the book what Punisher would do in the world of 2022. The answer is downright Trumpesque: stop the multicultural hordes at the border and take out the politicians in Washington.

If we needed a map of hell, perhaps the upcoming fiftieth anniversary of Punisher in 2024 would do as well as any. Marvel was sold to a conglomerate that apparently sold multivitamins and health aid materials with the same degree of enthusiasm, and then passed on to Disney. Three Punisher films succeeded only because associated media sales and broadcast/streaming rights brought in the money.

If it is hard to see where *A Cultural History of the Punisher* ends, that is because it does not end. The character will continue as long as demand makes still more replications and spin-offs profitable.

Capitalism, in his narrative, is obviously breaking down. Liberal democratic, that is also to say also social democratic, efforts at improvement have palpably failed. Something else is clearly needed. For Punisher, this is the perfect laboratory for something very much like fascism, or is it?

What is it for we who, likewise are skeptical about the State, believe in very different kinds of direct action and a different outcome?

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