THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SUPERHEROES

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AN UNAUTHORIZED EXPLORATION

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF
SUPERHEROES

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PREJUDICE LESSONS FROM THE XAVIER INSTITUTE

Anyone who has read X-Men comics or seen X-Men movies can't help but be aware of the detrimental role that prejudice plays. In this essay, Lyubansky shows us the ways in which the prejudice experienced by the X-Men—in particular Professor Xavier and Magneto—reflects what psychologists have learned about prejudice. This essay provides the reader with a clear sense of how prejudice against X-Men in the X-universe isn't so dissimilar to prejudice that occurs in our world. Lyubansky explains theories and research regarding *why* such prejudice arises, as well as different types of prejudice.

THE X-MEN[1] AREN'T YOUR TYPICAL SUPERHEROES. Sure, both the comics and the films are loaded with the typical clashes of superpowers that have long been a comic mainstay, but at their soul, the X-Men are less about superpowers and more about human tendencies to fear and hate those who are different, and the various ways we deal with such tendencies. In the words of long-time X-Men writer Chris Claremont, "The X-Men are hated, feared, and despised collectively by humanity for no other reason than that they are mutants. So what we have here, intended or not, is a book that is about racism, bigotry, and prejudice" (Claremont, 1982).

The remark about "intentionality" is noteworthy, and it's quite possible that prejudice was far from the minds of writer Stan Lee and illustrator Jack Kirby when they first introduced the X-Men in 1963. At the very least, given that the original ensemble of X-Men was entirely racially and ethnically homogeneous (as per the comic industry's standard of the time), the themes of prejudice were most likely not very well thought out at first. Nonetheless, the seeds of these themes were planted in the very first issue when Charles Xavier, a mutant telepath responsible for creating the X-Men, observed that human beings are not yet ready to accept super-powered individuals in their midst (*The X-Men* #1). By 1975, the X-Men were ethnically and racially diverse, featuring Canadian (Wolverine), Russian (Colossus), German (Nightcrawler), and African (Storm) characters that reflected the comic's ideology of tol-

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[1] Writing about the X-Men poses certain challenges. For starters, who exactly should one write about? The original five-member team, formed in 1963, consisted of Cyclops, Marvel Girl (Jean Grey), Angel, Beast, and Iceman. The more familiar (to most casual readers) 1975 team featured Cyclops (the only holdover from the original), Wolverine, Colossus, Nightcrawler, and Storm. At various points, other X-teams were formed, including The New Mutants, X-Factor, Excalibur, and Alpha Flight, and membership in these teams, as well as in the original X-Men, was constantly shifting as new characters joined and familiar faces came and went. The films had their own unique ensemble of the popular mutant heroes, as did two different animated TV shows: *X-Men Animated Series* and *X-Men: Evolution*. On top of all that, the comics introduced several alternative timelines, such as *Days of Future Past*, a reality in which the mutants were incarcerated in concentration camps, and *Age of Apocalypse*, in which a young Xavier gave up his life to save Magneto, who later formed the X-Men. Indeed, the number of known mutants in the X-Universe is so vast (at least 160 according to http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_X-Men_characters) and group alliances so fluid that even diligent fans sometimes have a hard time keeping track of who is part of which X-team at any point in time. For the purpose of this essay, I avoid the alternative timelines and focus mainly on the X-Universe itself, giving special attention to X-Men founder Charles Xavier and his long-time friend and adversary, Magneto, whose contrasting visions of human-mutant relations provide the backdrop for much of the series's commentary on group relations. As in the real world, the specific ensemble of individuals is not especially relevant to understanding group dynamics.

erance and multiculturalism—an ideology that was a good decade ahead of its time.[2]

The X-Men comics, however, do more than merely model an ideology of tolerance and diversity. Rather, they examine the causes of prejudice and intolerance and pit competing perspectives against each other as different characters try to come to terms with the ethical and psychological implications brought on by the dawn of a new evolutionary phase, in which genetic mutations have given a handful of humans a variety of different superpowers.

Mutants, of course, are intended as an allegory for oppression in general. X-Men readers/viewers are intended to generalize Professor Xavier's philosophy of tolerance and assimilation to other oppressed groups, including racial and ethnic minorities and the Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgendered (LGBT) community. Unfortunately, the analogies are not always adequate. In this essay, I first examine whether the depiction of anti-mutant prejudice in the X-Universe is consistent with what psychologists have learned about the development of prejudice and group conflict and then turn my attention to the intended analogy to the African American Civil Rights Movement.

PREJUDICE IN THE X-UNIVERSE

Although humans initially seemed pleased by the X-Men's contributions to law enforcement (*The X-Men* #1), anti-mutant sentiment quickly developed. Within approximately two years' time, the government deployed giant robot Sentinels, programmed to detect mutants and capture or kill them (*The X-Men* #14). In subsequent issues, the government continued to reflect society's prejudice through whatever means it had at its disposal, including the Mutant Registration Act[3] (*The X-Men* #181), and the development of the technologi-

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[2] A few years after this shift to multiculturalism, writer and artist John Byrne introduced the first gay superhero, Northstar, although Marvel did not allow him to actually "come out" formally until 1992 (*Alpha Flight* #106). Despite restrictions imposed by the Comics Code Authority, other gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters followed, including long-time friends and lovers, Mystique and Destiny (*Uncanny X-Men* #265). A list of gay and lesbian comic book characters is available at http://www.gayleague.com/gay/characters/.

[3] The Mutant Registration Act (MRA) is a controversial legislative bill in the X-Universe which mandated the registration of all mutants with the government. The specific terms of the MRA are not consistently described in the films or comics. However, it is generally assumed that the MRA would require all mutants to reveal their real names to the government and possibly also to obtain governmental approval in order to use their abilities.

cal "cure" for the X-gene (*Astonishing X-Men* #1–4). Although there are periods when tensions ease, human-mutant relations in the X-Universe are uneasy at best and often in a state of open conflict.

At the center of this conflict are two mutants, Erik Lehnsherr (a.k.a. Magneto) and his old friend, Charles Xavier, each with a different explanation for the anti-mutant sentiments. I will take up Xavier's position later (when I discuss the analogy to the Civil Rights Movement), but first let's take a look at Magneto's thesis and see if it's consistent with psychological research and real human history.

Magneto, a child Holocaust survivor who lost his entire family, believes that humans inevitably rise up against those who are different and that it is "just a matter of time before mutants are herded off to camps"[4] (X-Men). The following dialogue with Rogue,[5] during the first film's climactic scene at the Statue of Liberty, provides a glimpse of Magneto's worldview:

> MAGNETO: I first saw her in 1949. America was going to be the land of tolerance. Peace.
> ROGUE: Are you going to kill me?
> MAGNETO: Yes.
> ROGUE: Why?
> MAGNETO: Because there is no land of tolerance. There is no peace. Not here, or anywhere else that women, children, whole families are destroyed simply because they were born different from those in power.

From a historical perspective, Magneto certainly seems to have a point. Inter-ethnic group conflict has been around for thousands of years, and the United States, the self-proclaimed "land of immigrants" and "leader of the free world" is no exception. In addition to enacting the slave trade, the Jim Crow laws that followed, and the forced internment of more than 100,000 Japanese Americans during

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[4] This is a reference to Nazi concentration camps, as well as to the popular 1981 story arc set in an alternate future in which the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants' assassination of a U.S. senator led to the incarceration of mutants in concentration camps (*Uncanny X-Men* #141–142).

[5] Rogue is a mutant member of the X-Men. Her mutation, which she often considers a curse, forces her to involuntarily absorb the memories and life energies, and in the case of other mutants, super abilities of anyone with whom she makes skin contact, preventing her from physically touching others, including her friends and romantic interests.

WWII, the U.S. government also engaged in a variety of other unsavory activities that were clearly motivated by prejudice and/or fear. While many of these[6] are less familiar to the general public, they are nevertheless an important part of U.S. history, a history that Lehnsherr seems to know well, particularly the U.S. compulsory sterilization program.[7]

Although the Nazis forcefully sterilized more people than any other country (more than 450,000 people in less than a decade), the United States is second on the list! More importantly, the U.S. sterilization program, as well as its eugenics program in general, not only preceded the Nazis but actually served as their inspiration (Kuhl). In 1907, Indiana became the first U.S. state to enact sterilization legislation, followed by Washington and California in 1909. In 1927, the U.S. Supreme Court legitimized the practice in *Buck v. Bell*, and the number of forced sterilizations increased each year until 1942, when another Supreme Court case, *Skinner v. Oklahoma*, ruled that forced sterilization of criminals was unconstitutional (eugenic sterilizations were still permitted). Although the mentally retarded and mentally ill were the groups most frequently targeted, Native Americans were also forcefully sterilized against their will, often without their knowledge, when they were hospitalized for some other reason.

Thus, when Magneto warns that "the cure" for the X-gene, initially offered on a voluntary basis, will be forced upon mutants, he certainly has historical precedent. But times do change. It is not unreasonable to argue that not only do genes evolve, but so do societies. Is it not possible for different groups to live peacefully together now, even if they have struggled to do so historically? To answer this question, we have to turn to the psychological literature on prejudice and group conflict. Like the topics themselves, the body of knowledge is complex and multi-dimensional, with a variety of competing theories. A comprehensive review of all the relevant theories is

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[6] For example, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, tens of thousands of American Indian children were forcefully removed from their families and placed into Federal or Christian boarding schools in order to facilitate the assimilation of American Indians into mainstream society. Upon arrival to the schools, children were given American names, prohibited from speaking their native language, and forced to learn and practice Christianity instead of their native religion.

[7] Compulsory sterilization programs are government policies which force people to undergo surgical sterilization, usually as part of eugenics programs intended to prevent the reproduction and multiplication of members of the population considered to be undesirable (Wikipedia).

beyond the scope of this essay, but the following four theoretical frameworks provide a good testing ground for both Magneto's claims about human nature and for the depiction of prejudice development in the X-Universe.

AUTHORITARIAN PERSONALITY THEORY

When psychologists tried to make sense of the Holocaust perpetrated by the Nazis, one of the first theories offered was that the Germans, with their emphasis on efficiency and organization, were characterized by an authoritarian personality that caused them to (1) think in "us vs. them" categories, rather than make more inclusive categorizations that might have, for example, considered the local Jews as Germans, and (2) follow orders from authority figures without engaging in a self-reflective or critical-thinking process regarding the moral implications of those orders.[8] Thus, the Holocaust, according to the authoritarian personality theory, occurred because Germans were predisposed to not think of Jews as German and to obey Nazi-authority demands, even if such demands required immoral behavior. In the context of the X-Universe, this theory suggests that anti-mutant prejudice developed because humans were predisposed to not recognize the humanity of the mutants and to follow the demands of the fanatical few who, like Senator Kelly, deliberately stirred people's fears and pushed an anti-mutant agenda.

For many years, this theory, which essentially locates the cause of prejudice in a person's disposition, dominated psychological thinking and had a profound influence on the way many historians approached group conflict. However, by the 1970s, empirical studies revealed so many problems and limitations that the theory was all but abandoned by psychologists.[9] As just two examples: the theory was limited by its inability to address why some groups are targeted but not others,[10] as well as by its complete failure to account for sit-

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[8] The theory itself can be considered an example of group prejudice, as it is based on German stereotypes and anti-German sentiments that were common in the United States after WWII.

[9] Although largely rejected by contemporary psychologists, the authoritarian personality continues to influence historical texts, including *The War Against the Jews* (Dawidowitzc) and *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Goldhagen).

[10] In the X-Universe, for example, mutants are targeted but, for the most part, superheroes who gained their power through other means (e.g., Spider-Man) are not.

uational factors,[11] such as whether other people in the vicinity expressed or denounced the prejudicial attitudes. Subsequent theories of prejudice attempted to address these issues.

REALISTIC GROUP CONFLICT THEORY

The Realistic Conflict Theory attempts to integrate situational and dispositional components. According to this theory, groups compete over scarce resources such as jobs, land, and power. During competition, out-groups are considered enemies in order to justify the attempt to "win," and these enemies are then dehumanized and scapegoated. This theory was first popularized through the classic Robbers Cave study (Sherif) in which the researchers were able to create group prejudice in two randomly assigned groups of twelve-year-old boys by creating group competition (in the form of a tournament) in which the boys competed over prizes, which could only be obtained by being a member of the winning group. Within days, the two groups of boys (none of whom knew each other previously) were on such bad terms that they engaged in fighting and name-calling whenever together and preferred not to eat in the same space (Sherif). Other studies (e.g., Kinder, Runciman), employing very different methodologies, have also supported this theory, as does practically every anti-immigration demonstration, where protestors commonly make (often unverified) claims about the negative impact of immigration on the employment opportunities of "Americans."

As in our reality, there is no shortage of group-level competition over resources in the X-Universe. This is most evident in the form of competition over desirable jobs, especially military, espionage (e.g., S.H.I.E.L.D.),[12] and law enforcement jobs, which are probably most threatened by the presence of mutants with superpowers.[13] However,

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[11] The profound influence of situational factors was acutely demonstrated by two classic psychological studies: Stanley Milgram's study of obedience and Phil Zimbardo's study of prison roles. Although a detailed description and analysis of these studies is beyond the scope of this essay, taken together, these studies changed our understanding of human behavior, with situational factors taking on a much more prominent role.

[12] S.H.I.E.L.D. originally stood for Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage, Law-Enforcement Division but was changed in 1991 to Strategic Hazard Intervention, Espionage and Logistics Directorate. It is a counterterrorism and intelligence agency in the X-Universe, which deals with superhuman threats (Wikipedia, 2007).

[13] This topic is given a detailed treatment in Alan Moore's critically acclaimed *Watchmen* (DC Comics, 1987).

given the vast array of mutant powers, there are probably few occupations in which humans could truly compete on an equal basis.

Of course, there are other resources to compete for besides jobs, including political representation or, in more general terms, political power. This is one way of understanding why oppressed groups are sometimes at odds with each other rather than presenting a unified front against the dominant group. That is, minority groups are reluctant to work together because each may be afraid that its political, social, and economic interests would be subsumed or even subverted under the umbrella-group's agenda. By the same token, the dominant group is often reluctant to voluntarily include members of minority groups in the political process because of the possibility that these individuals would favor their group interests over those of the majority group.[14] Perhaps this is the real reason for Senator Kelly's campaign against the mutants: He is afraid that, left to their own devices, mutants will eventually acquire political power, which they can then leverage for their own interests that may not coincide with human interests.

Of course, there is more—much more—to prejudice than just competition over resources. Social Identity Theory provides an entirely different perspective.

SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY

First proposed by Henri Tajfel[15] and John Turner (Taijfel & Turner), Social Identity Theory (SIT) consists of three elements: *categorization*, *identification*, and *comparison*. Categorization consists of people's inclination to put both themselves and others into categories, such as Blacks, gays, feminists, or mutants.[16] Identity (or identification) is then presumed to be determined through an association with those groups that make people feel good about themselves, groups that are seen as good, strong, and positive. However, "good," "strong," and "positive" are relative terms. That is, an in-group is only "good"

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[14] In this context, it will be interesting to see how Barack Obama fares in the 2008 primary.

[15] Like Eric Leshnerr, Tajfel was a Holocaust survivor.

[16] These categories (especially racial categories) are, for the most part, social constructions. That is, although the variation in people's skin tone and other features is real, we are socialized to give special meaning to "race" that we don't give to other types of human variation, such as eye color or hair color.

if it is better than a relevant out-group, which is where comparison comes in. According to Social Identity Theory, people compare their in-group with other groups, with a strong bias toward viewing their own group positively and the out-group critically.[17] The result of this often-innocent process is out-group prejudice.

Of course, the comparisons are often *not* made innocently, especially by those who push a war agenda. Thus, when the group categories are (1) readily accepted and (2) widely incorporated into people's identity, group comparisons can be used by war hawks on both sides to mobilize their group for conflict. These two criteria are clearly met in the X-Universe, allowing both Magneto and Senator Kelly to appeal to core beliefs (about one's in-group) that are associated with people's willingness to support or engage in group conflict.[18] Senator Kelly appeals is to humanity's sense of vulnerability, cautioning that "We must know who they are, and above all, what they can do" (X-Men), while Magneto makes appeals to several mobilizing beliefs, including vulnerability (e.g., "it's just a matter of time before mutants are herded off to camps"), distrust (e.g., "there is no land of tolerance"), and superiority (e.g., "We are the future, Charles, not them; they no longer matter") (X-Men).

Altogether, the X-Universe's depiction of how anti-mutant prejudice is formed and then manipulated by leaders is psychologically sound. Unfortunately, the creative team's attempt to draw a series of explicit parallels to the Civil Rights Movement is less successful, and it is to this analogy that I now turn.

PARALLELS TO OTHER FORMS OF OPPRESSION

A variety of critics have compared Xavier's (and Magneto's) fight for mutant rights to the U.S. Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Indeed,

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[17] This tendency is so strong that individuals even show consistent in-group favoritism in minimal group experiments in which participants are told that they are being assigned to a group based on some meaningless characteristic (e.g., shirt color) and are never given the opportunity to meet or learn anything about either in-group or out-group members. It is worth noting, however, that although minimal groups do yield in-group favoritism, they do not result in out-group derogation. In other words, minimal-group participants may be more likely to describe their in-group in positive terms; they are not more likely to describe out-group members in negative terms.

[18] The five core beliefs are that one's in-group is vulnerable, has experienced injustice, has reason to be distrustful of the out-group, is superior (sometimes expressed as moral superiority), and has the means to win (Eidelson & Eidelson).
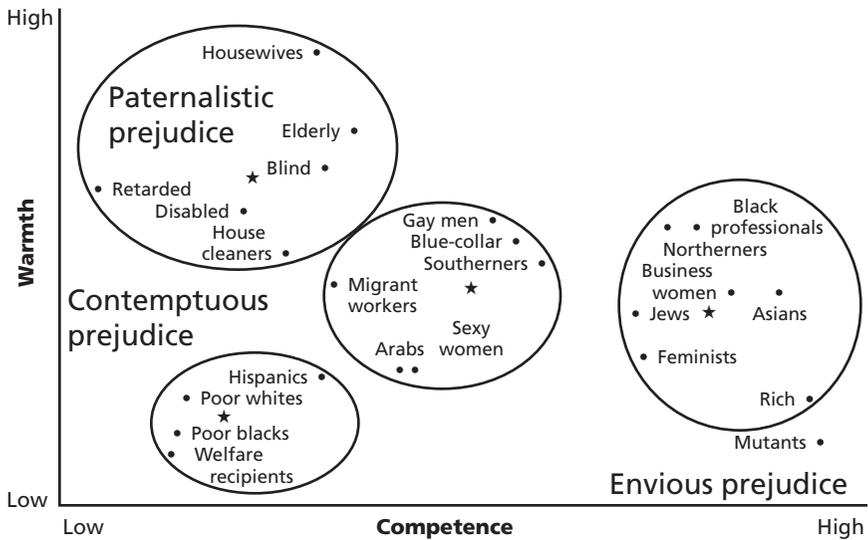
there are important parallels, including mob violence and familiar hateful slogans, such as "The only good mutant is a dead mutant." In addition, the X-Universe is populated by a variety of anti-mutant hate groups such as *Friends of Humanity*, *Humanity's Last Stand*, *the Church of Humanity*, and *Stryker's Purifiers*, which represent real oppressive forces like the Ku Klux Klan and a variety of other Christian Identity[19] and White Supremacy groups. It is also notable that, like some Blacks in the pre-civil rights South, many mutants keep their status hidden, hoping to blend or "pass" into mainstream society, while others want to actually *be* human so much that they volunteer for a "cure" with unknown risks (*X-Men: The Last Stand*).

However, the mutants' experience of prejudice is in many ways not analogous to the oppression experienced by Blacks and other racial minority groups. To begin with, although many groups experience prejudice, the specific attitudes that people hold and express toward these groups are often very different. This was demonstrated by Susan Fiske et al., who had samples of college students and community members rate twenty-three different out-groups on two dimensions: expressed warmth (i.e., how positively people felt toward out-group members) and perceived competence (i.e., how competent people perceived out-group members to be). Results from both samples (see chart below) revealed three different types of prejudice: *paternalistic prejudice* (high warmth towards group with low perception of group's competence), *contemptuous prejudice* (low warmth towards group with low perception of group's competence), and *envious prejudice* (low warmth towards group with high perception of group's competence). While this study did not include mutants in their list of out-groups (clearly a glaring oversight!), X-Men fans know that mutants tend to be regarded by humans with little warmth but are perceived to be high in competence. This combination would place them squarely into the envious prejudice category, far from most African Americans today and farther still from how Black Americans were perceived during the fight for civil rights in the 1960s.[20]

There are still other problems with the analogy. Although oppressed

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[19] Christian Identity (CI) is a label applied to a wide variety of loosely affiliated groups and churches with a racialized theology, including Aryan Nations. Many CI believers "justify the use of violence in order to punish violators of God's law," as interpreted by CI ministers and adherents (Wikipedia).

[20] They are similarly far from gay men, another parallel intended by the X-Men creative team.

High

Warmth

Paternalistic prejudice

Housewives •

Elderly •

★ Blind •

• Retarded
Disabled •
House
cleaners •

Gay men •
Blue-collar •
Southerners •

• Migrant
workers   ★

Sexy
women

Arabs

• •

Black
• • professionals
Northerners
Business
women •   •
• Jews ★   Asians

• Feminists

Rich •

Mutants •

Envious prejudice

Contemptuous prejudice

Hispanics •
• Poor whites
★
• Poor blacks
• Welfare
recipients

Low

Low   **Competence**   High

Perception of Out-Groups, from Fiske et al., (2002), JPSP, 82, 878–902.

groups are not necessarily powerless,[21] unlike some mutants, they often lack the physical force or political power to stop their own oppression. Under these circumstances, placing the burden of peace and tolerance on the oppressed group can itself be seen as a subtle form of oppression; for, this expectation blames the victimized for their own victimization. Thus, while it is reasonable to expect super-powered mutants to make accommodations in order to fit into mainstream society, this expectation becomes increasingly less reasonable the less power an oppressed group enjoys *vis-à-vis* mainstream society.[22]

Unfortunately, the tendency to blame the oppressed group for its victimization is not just a fictional or historical phenomenon. Today our society continues to express this mindset in a variety of instantly

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[21] Oppressed groups have used everything from non-violent resistance, to more physical resistance to more physical resistance like rock and bottle throwing to even more physical resistance like guns and home-made bombs to fight more powerful groups–sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

[22] Taken to an extreme, such a mindset would have blamed Jews in Nazi Germany and Blacks in the antebellum South for their victimization and expected them to make accommodations for the sake of peace, rather than demanding that the society itself become more accepting and less oppressive. In fact, this is what actually occurred as Nazis blamed the Jews for their condition and slave owners rationalized the institution of slavery by arguing that the "uncivilized" Africans needed the firm hand of the slave masters to lead happy and productive lives.

recognizable ways, as when we suggest that a woman who was sexually assaulted should have worn less revealing clothing or imply that a gay man could choose to have a different sexual orientation. On some level, X-Men United (*X-2*, 2003) understands the folly of this type of thinking. The film even pokes fun of victim-blaming tendencies in its very effective parody (and social critique) of how some families react to a child who "comes out" as gay.[23] Indeed, it is no more possible to will oneself into not being a mutant, as it is to will oneself into not being gay or female or a person of color. Yet, the X-Men creative team fails to take the critique to its logical conclusion, for it accepts the assumption that it is the mutants (and, by extension, gays, lesbians, and people of color) who must somehow make themselves fit into mainstream society, rather than expecting society to become more inclusive.

The portrayal of leaders is yet another serious flaw in the X-Universe's treatment of prejudice. Just as mutants are designed to represent oppressed groups, so are the mutant leaders intended to represent leaders of oppressed groups. More specifically, it is widely accepted by X-Men fans that Charles Xavier and Magneto represent the philosophies of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, respectively. This argument posits that, like King, Charles Xavier works for better relations between humans and mutants, "dreaming" of peace, acceptance, and integration, while, in contrast, Magneto is a militant "reverse-racist" who, having "lost faith in the unfulfilled 'dream', fights for the liberation of his people 'by any means necessary'"[24] (Morpheus, 2003). It's a provocative argument, and Magneto's use of the phrase "by any means necessary" leaves little doubt that the parallel was intended by the writers. Unfortunately, the analogy is entirely inaccurate. To begin with, despite his contention that "mankind isn't evil, just uninformed" (*X-Men*, 2000), Xavier starts a school to educate mutants, not humans. His rationale for doing so is that when humans see that the mutants don't constitute a threat, they will have no reason to hate and fear them. The comparable strategy

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[23] When Bobby (the Iceman) "comes out" (as a mutant) to his family, the disclosure causes his younger brother to turn him in to the authorities, but it is his mother's sugary response that is instructive in this context: "Bobby, have you ever tried not being a mutant?" she asks him gently (*X-2*, 2003).

[24] Magneto uses this phrase in his conversation with Xavier at the end of *X-Men* (2000), saying: "The [human-mutant] war is coming, and I intend to fight it by any means necessary."

of educating Blacks on how to work and live better with Whites was, in fact, advocated by some Black leaders in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly by Booker T. Washington.[25] However, this strategy was entirely out of favor by the 1960s, when Malcolm X, King, and other Civil Rights leaders all advocated some sort of resistance. Moreover, Xavier rarely actually agitates, campaigns, or even speaks out for mutant rights, focusing his energy instead on persuading the X-Men to "use their awesome abilities to protect a world that hates and fears them" from other, more malevolent, mutants. This is the equivalent of King shielding the White majority from Malcolm X and the Black Power movement rather than fighting for Black equality and justice. This never happened!

The Magneto/Malcolm X parallel is even more problematic. To be sure, Magneto, like Malcolm X, actually does seem to be genuinely concerned with mutant rights and also at one point adopts a separatist stance. However, despite this concern, as well as his one-time friendship with Xavier, Magneto, for the most part, is more focused on world domination than on mutant rights. Even the name of his organization, Brotherhood of Evil Mutants,[26] is more indicative of fanaticism and terrorism than social activism and racial justice. This supposed representation of Malcolm X is not only historically inaccurate but actually serves to reinforce many White fears and stereotypes about African Americans in general and Black Muslims in particular.

The real Malcolm X was a complex, multi-layered person whose thinking about race and racism evolved over the course of his life. For a period in his life, under the direction of Elijah Muhammad, he loathed all Whites. However, he eventually rejected this racist be-

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[25] Readers looking for real-world counterparts for Xavier and Magneto should examine the lives and work of Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. Du Bois, respectively. Like Xavier, Washington stressed the need for the oppressed group (Blacks) to work together with the dominant group (Whites) and saw education (of Blacks) as the primary means toward gaining acceptance and tolerance. Meanwhile, Du Bois started out as Washington's ally but over time grew increasingly critical of Washington for his unwillingness to aggressively confront Whites about Black civil rights. Du Bois called Washington "The Great Accommodator," but the two men continued an ongoing dialogue about segregation and the Black struggle, long after they began to differ on the best way to achieve these rights. Of course, the Magneto/Du Bois parallel is also flawed. Unlike the often-villainous Magneto, Du Bois never advocated violence and, at the end of his life, was sympathetic to the class-less Communist ideology.

[26] The X-Men films removed the word "evil" found in the comics, allowing Magneto to form instead the much more palatable "Brotherhood of Mutants."

lief system,[27] and corresponding adversarial stance, replacing it with a more moderate approach that included working with other Civil Rights activists—White and Black. In the context of the X-Men's appropriation of the "by any means necessary" phrase, it also bears stressing that a close examination of Malcolm X's speeches, autobiography,[28] and private correspondence shows "no evidence that he advocated the use of wanton violence against whites" but rather suggested that Blacks respond to violence with violence when the law fails to protect them (Leader, 1993, p. 174).

CONCLUSION

These are egregious flaws, and their probable harm to readers' thinking about race relations should not be dismissed or minimized. And yet, I cannot bring myself to take an overly critical stance. The X-Men creative teams present an accurate depiction of prejudice and, at times, manage to turn a superhero soap-opera into an opportunity to meaningfully engage readers of all ages with social issues that are all too often ignored by both the mainstream media and mainstream educational institutions. Moreover, even if the X-Men comics and films at times fail to adequately or accurately convey what scholars have learned about prejudice and group relations, they nevertheless open the door for historians and social scientists to enter the discussion and provide their own perspectives. These discussions are sorely needed, if sharing the world is *ever* to be humanity's defining attribute.

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[27] He later referred to this period of his life as foolishness that cost him twelve lost years (Clarke, 1969).

[28] "I'm not for wanton violence, I'm for justice....And I feel that when the law fails to protect Negroes from whites' attack then those Negroes should use arms, if necessary, to defend themselves....I am speaking against and my fight is against white *racists*. I firmly believe that Negroes have the right to fight against these racists, by any means that are necessary" (Malcolm X and Haley, 1965, 366–367).

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